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SHORT STORIES

A WEEKLY MAGAZINE FOR HOME AND TRAIN

No. 636. FOR WEEK ENDING MARCH 9TH, 1901. [ONE PENNY.

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SHORT STORIES.

No. 636.] For the Week Ending March 9th, 1901. [ONE PENNY.

A Keeper of Secrets

By R. NORMAN SILVER.

Being Days in the Professional Life of the late Mr. Hugo Pontifex, the Famous West-end Solicitor.

To those who had only met him casually in Society, the late Mr. Pontifex was a good-tempered mystery. Bluff, handsome, and, in spite of his middle-age, a little of a dandy, he seemed the last man in the world to deserve his reputation, which was that of the keenest, most audacious, and unerring of family lawyers. Fair-haired, and powerful as an athlete, his striking appearance was increased by his eyes, one of which was grey and one blue.

In reality, however, Hugo Pontifex had a wide and almost exclusively aristocratic practice. He seldom briefed a barrister, seldom set foot in a court of justice, but single handed he hunted down, captured, and safely buried mystery after mystery of terrible import to Mayfair and Belgravia.

An expert in strangling scandal, he lived a life of enthralling interest, and died a rich man. When his executors went through his papers they found nothing to satisfy their curiosity, though plenty to excite it. Hugo Pontifex knew the value of fire—and the dangers of ink. But from time to time he related to the writer, who enjoyed a certain measure of his confidence, the incidents which form the basis of the following stories. In speaking of these strange fragments of drama, Mr. Pontifex himself employed fictitious names, the present author being left to guess vainly at the identity of the genuine actors.

II.—THE TRUE STORY OF THE AMBERLEY MARRIAGE.

"GET me a hansom."

Mr. Pontifex uttered this brief command into the mouthpiece of the speaking-tube at his elbow. Then he replaced the whistle, hung up the tube, and began to copy on to a slip of paper one of the many curt memoranda contained in a small red note-book which he took from a locked drawer. When he had finished and put away the note-book the scrap of scribbling-paper held a name and address. It read:

"Colonel Denis Amberley, V.C.,
The Towers,
Hailey,
Bucks."

The solicitor rose, and picking up a smart kit-bag of cow-hide from a corner, walked out to the St. James' Street exit of the block that held his offices. He took with him, carefully folded, the slip of paper on which he had copied the address in Buckinghamshire.

"Paddington," he said to the driver of the cab that was in waiting, and entering it with his kit-bag, was borne off through the West-end a cool, almost indolent figure, lounging in the open hansom, and gazing dreamily at the crowded streets and the early afternoon sunshine, through the half-closed lids of his singular eyes.

The appointment which was carrying Mr. Pontifex towards Buckinghamshire on this June day, had been made some day or two previously, in a short and formal communication that had asked him to leave town, should it be possible, without a moment's delay. That note was endorsed "Private," and signed "Denis Amberley." The addition of the writer's military rank and distinctions in Mr. Pontifex's memorandum was the result of that gentleman's own cautious investigations. He had been detained in London for some forty-eight hours, and had profited by them to acquaint himself with certain details of Denis Amberley's career.

A brilliant officer, still in the first prime of a vigorous life, admittedly handsome, almost the last of an old county family, the life-tenant of a fine estate and fortune, and—a bachelor; such was Mr. Pontifex's most recent, and as yet unseen client. Some three months before, the Colonel had returned from South Africa with a Boer bullet through his shoulder, and had settled down at the historic home of the Amberleys—that is to say, at The Towers, near Hailey. To the surprise of his friends, although that popular person, a gallant soldier, home from the wars, Colonel Denis Amberley had been practically invisible during the season that was just closing.

Mr. Pontifex enjoyed his railway journey through the drowsy afternoon, and still more the spanking run to The Towers in a comfortable dog-cart. His destination proved to be a pleasant country house, of ancient date

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but fairly modern adaptation. A lawyer's scrutiny is keen, and as Mr. Pontifex surveyed The Towers and the fine park and estate surrounding it, he decided mentally that he would not be required to advise upon any financial problem. Colonel Amberley had plainly money and to spare.

The butler received him with practised ease, and Mr. Pontifex and his kit bag were escorted to a bright sleeping room, where he made a rapid toilet, for the Buckinghamshire roads had been dusty. As he descended the galleried staircase to join the servant who was to show him to Colonel Amberley's apartment, Mr. Pontifex heard the rustle of skirts and g'anced round.

On the level upper landing that he was passing there moved a woman, young and beautiful. She was a brunette of brunettes, dark-eyed, dark-haired, dark-skinned. Her lips were scarlet, but peculiarly thin and compressed, her gaze piercing and critical, her features small, regular, and determined. When she disappeared

Mr. Pontifex started. A little hand had been laid upon his arm.

into a corridor that opened from the massive landing, she left upon Mr. Pontifex's mind the impression of a personality both powerful and selfish. Also, he felt certain that she had been watching for him, and that in her single instant's observation she had taken a profound and comprehensive review of the new-comer.

Reflectively the solicitor pursued his descent. Traversing a second and lower landing, he crossed the extremity of a narrow lobby, arched and dimly lighted. Mr. Pontifex started—a little hand had been laid upon his arm.

"Please," said a sweet voice; "you are the surgeon that Colonel Amberley expected, aren't you—may I speak to you a moment?"

The solicitor did not disclaim the character with which he had been so unceremoniously invested. He was looking admiringly at the speaker; save for her youth and beauty she was the antithesis of the woman Mr. Pontifex had seen upon the upper landing. Fair and sunny, with wilful curls of a golden-brown, and tender blue eyes, she had a complexion of snow, warmed by the tiny blushes that ebbed and flowed to her soft cheeks. Mr. Pontifex noticed that she wore the prettiest of walking-costumes and a large and summery hat. He bowed gravely, as if to grant the request she had preferred.

His petitioner, colouring hotly, drew him into the dusky entry. The solicitor perceived that she had taken a hasty survey of the staircase, as if afraid of an interruption.

"I—I am Gladys Ansell," she said simply; "I am engaged to be married to Denis—to Colonel Amberley. I know it's shamefully unconventional my speaking to you like this on the sly. But I wanted to see you before anyone else to—to ask you if you wouldn't urge Colonel Amberley to leave Hailey and go abroad for a while. I'm sure it's his only chance of getting better, and the other doctors say he mustn't risk it. And if he stops here he will die."

The tears sprang to her blue eyes and her low tones faltered.

Mr. Pontifex studied her in silence—he had begun to twist the emerald ring on his finger.

"A woman's instinct is a thing to be reckoned with," he told her; "and yet the doctors are sometimes in the right."

Gladys Ansell shook her head—she was struggling with her grief and could not speak. Some words broke from her lips at last.

"It's not instinct," she sobbed; "I know. They are all blind, every one of them, and Denis will be killed."

She hid her face in her palms.

"I can't lose him," she moaned; "I can't lose him—oh, what shall I do!"

The girl checked herself to listen apprehensively.

"There's someone coming downstairs," she whispered; "go, quick!" and she herself darted into the gloom of the passage.

Mr. Pontifex strode on to the galleried landing in a second and resumed his descent with the greatest unconcern. But, absent-minded as he seemed, he had remarked in a lightning glance that the dark-eyed girl was leaning over the loftiest of the carved oak balustrades. Her expression was more absorbed and masterful than ever.

Reaching the hall, the solicitor was ushered by the impassive footman into an attractive apartment, all French windows, settees, sweeping curtains and *bric-à-brac*.

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"Mr. Pontifex, sir," announced the servant.

Someone rose from a lounge—someone with a stooping frame and who walked with a stick. Yet the face of this person was still clean-cut and military, the shoulders square and strong. The stoop was that of the invalid and not the aged.

A trembling hand was held out to the solicitor. "I am glad to see you at last, Mr. Pontifex," he was told; "I am Colonel Denis Amberley. Pray be seated." The solicitor accepted the invitation; his host motioned to a stand placed conveniently.

"You smoke?" he inquired; "here are cigarettes, if you prefer them—Havanas and my own choice, Trichinopolies—I never smoke anything else. The box is almost empty, as you see; but be reassured I have ample reserves."

He rang as he spoke and ordered a fresh box of his favourites.

Mr. Pontifex, rejecting the Trichinopolies, took a Havana. The Colonel relighted his own cigar.

"I ought just to explain to you, Mr. Pontifex," said Denis Amberley when the door had finally closed behind the footman, "that my household regard you as a distinguished surgeon, whom I am consulting informally on the score of an old friendship. I did not wish it to be known that I was having recourse to a lawyer, and one, at that, of your exceptional reputation."

The solicitor nodded—he comprehended some little of the proceedings on the staircase.

"I am," went on the Colonel, 'tenant for life of The Towers and its rent-roll, and at present a bachelor." He sighed, and touched the ash from his cigar. "The next heir," he continued, "is my cousin, daughter of my father's sister, who married in France a French physician. Both died some years ago, and I had the girl brought here and taken care of, setting up a chaperone for the purpose. Julie is extremely good-looking, a brunette of a most striking kind, and for a while I had a secret fancy to marry her. If I married anyone else, and had had children, Julie would be practically disinherited. Well, the best laid plans—you know the proverb. I met someone else. I came back from South Africa to recuperate and found a new rector at Hailey. His nineteen-year-old daughter was my fate—I fell in love with Gladys Ansell."

Denis Amberley puffed at his cigar troublously.

"Julie took it quietly," he said. "Of course, I told her that I would have her provided for, in spite of my marriage; but I could see that she had expected to be mistress of The Towers, either as my wife or successor. Young as she is, she is cool, fierce, passionate, ambitious. Almost since the day she learnt of my engagement to Gladys Ansell, I have felt that I was a dying man."

The Colonel had finished his statement in a nervous whisper. Mr. Pontifex did not vary the small cloudlets that were stealing from his nostrils. The lids were lowered over his curious eyes.

"My marriage draws near," murmured Denis Amberley, "but my doctors insist that it must be postponed. They warn me against excitement. My complaint puzzles them hopelessly. Yet, even with my life and Gladys' happiness at stake, I dare not tell them that I am being poisoned—poisoned, and by Julie Lepage."

The instrument was a phypodermic syringe. Mr. Pontifex had seen enough.

Mr. Pontifex laid down his Havana.

"You have reasons for your belief, I suppose?" he commented drily.

The Colonel leant forward to whisper.

"Once," he said, "when I was, to all appearance, asleep upon this very couch, she came and looked at me—looked at me and smiled—a terrible, significant smile, as I saw through my lashes. And then she put out her hand and touched the pulse in my wrist and smiled again. That smile awakened me to my danger. Since then I have guarded my food and drink in ways that have made those around me think me mad, and yet I have grown worse, even when she spent, at my insistence, a fortnight in town. The only signs of improvement I have shown were during a pretended quarrel with Gladys. Yet I have not dared to breathe my knowledge to a soul, even to my darling, for I have no proof. If I could but get away from Hailey! But

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they say that my heart is so weak that it would be certain death to face travelling."

He was interrupted by the sound of a gong beaten in the hall outside.

"That is the dressing gong," explained the Colonel; "never mind, we will finish our talk later. I want you to see the woman I suspect so gravely, Mr. Pontifex; that is why I have arranged to dine in company to-night, invalid as I am. If she is to be unmasked and defeated it is you who must do it, and without publicity—I cannot send my father's niece to gaol." He bowed the solicitor out of the apartment and summoned his attendant to help him to his own dressing-room.

Mr. Pontifex went thoughtfully about his toilet. Yet he performed it with his usual rapidity and returned in the gathering twilight to the hall. The dinner-gong proper had not gone and he stepped into the room in which he had had his interview with the Colonel.

As he entered, moving in the silent fashion natural to him, he saw that it was not empty. By the Colonel's smoking-table, under the vague glow of the electric pendant, stood the girl he had first passed on the staircase and whose black eyes and resolute type of beauty he had since decided could be none other than those of Julie Lepage, Denis Amberley's suspected cousin. But now she was gorgeous in a gown of crimson silk, with a train like that of a court robe.

She was unconscious of his presence and absorbed by her occupation. In one hand she held a bundle of the Trichinopolies from the freshly-opened box, in the other some instrument that she was applying to each of the cigars in turn.

Mr. Pontifex started violently. The instrument was a hypodermic syringe with a long needle! Mr. Pontifex had seen enough.

He regained the door and passed out—he knew now the reason why Denis Amberley's powers had so strangely failed him during the last three months, and knew, too, why the Frenchwoman had smiled so terribly as she stole to her victim's side to feel his enfeebled pulse. But how to act on that knowledge—this was the problem.

As the solicitor pondered, the dinner-gong sounded and he moved towards the dining-room.

The party at the oval table resolved itself into one of five—Gladys Ansell, whom the near neighbourhood of the rectory had enabled to change her costume and return for dinner in a simple white frock, Julie Lepage, blazing like a poppy in the gown that only a Frenchwoman and a brunette dare wear, the Colonel, Mr. Pontifex, and a gentle old lady in a rustling black silk. She was Julie's chaperone and more than half afraid of her. The solicitor had taken the seat on the Frenchwoman's right, glancing significantly at the colonel as he did so. Julie Lepage studied her neighbour with covert hostility—it was plain that she was on her guard against this supposed surgeon who was a friend of Colonel Amberley.

Mr. Pontifex exerted himself to draw her into conversation—he was a skilful entertainer and, though his own brain was busy with the task before it, he soon succeeded in casting the spell of his animation upon his fellow-diners. Even Denis Amberley grew less wan and frail, and the sweet, sad countenance of Gladys Ansell brightened to see her betrothed so unwontedly cheerful. Occasionally she looked across at Mr. Pontifex, perplexed yet encouraged by his high spirits.

A daring idea had taken possession of the solicitor's mind. He pretended that the wine-glasses at the Frenchwoman's elbow were too near his own, and moved them, with a slight apology. He had seen that she liked champagne and had emptied her glass once already; it had just been refilled. He sighed inaudibly as he watched her drink from it again and again. The sigh was one of relief—he had laid the first stone of his plot.

When the dessert was reached he had decided upon the exact manner in which he would lay the second one. His own glass had been replenished—he raised it and bowed to the delicate figure at the head of the table.

"Your health, Colonel Amberley," he said clearly, and as the Colonel's eyes met his, the solicitor shot a warning glance that puzzled the gallant officer not a little. He murmured a sentence of thanks. Mr.

"Save me! Save me!" she implored. "Don't let me die! I'm afraid to die!"

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Pontifex put his glass to his lips, held it there an instant, and set it down with the liquor untouched.

"A thousand pardons," he cried. "I forgot that the wine was champagne; I never drink healths in champagne. Once I could have done so, now the wine seems to me unlucky."

"Oh, why?" asked Gladys Ansell, putting down her own glass heavily. Mr. Pontifex shrugged his shoulders; the second stone of his plot was in position—what would happen when he began upon the superstructure?

"It is associated in my mind," he answered, meeting kindly the blue orbs of the Colonel's betrothed, "with a curious tragedy in which I took part." He turned to the Frenchwomen at his side. "Singularly enough," he added, "the heroine, or, rather, the female villain of the piece, was a compatriot of yours, Miss Lepage. She was a relation of a client of mine—she—she tried to—to poison a man; a man she had once loved."

Julie Lepage started, despite herself. She veiled the motion by lifting one of her white shoulders cynically and putting her champagne-glass to her mouth.

"She tried to poison him," went on Mr. Pontifex, deliberately, "in a most ingenious and original way." He paused to give the next few words their full effect. "That way was to poison a brand of cigars of which he was particularly fond, and of which he kept a stock, as he smoked them regularly."

Denis Amberley's face had become very white; his fingers were clutching at the edge of the chair on which he sat.

But Julie Lepage was looking down, steadily, at a cluster of grapes upon her plate. She might have been transformed to stone, so still was she sitting.

"The secret was discovered—fortunately for my client's life," went on Mr. Pontifex quietly, his grey eye marking her every feature; "and, in order to do justice upon the wretched creature without bringing scandal on an old and honourable family, I had a proportion of the poison extracted from a number of the cigars.

"One evening—at her cousin's house, the man she had tried to kill was her cousin, I don't think I said that——"

He hesitated, as if to increase the tension at the table—Gladys Ansell's lips were set and her face as white as that of her betrothed.

Only the pleasant chaperone, in her black silk dress, was listening to the story as to some interesting anecdote.

"This proportion of concentrated poison was introduced dexterously, by myself," added the solicitor, still with his grey eyes on Julia Lepage, "into the Frenchwoman's wine-glass—a champagne glass, as it happened. The poison in its concentrated state was deadly; the would-be murderer had but a few hours to live."

A piercing shriek broke into the narrative, which Mr. Pontifex had so cunningly woven. Julie Lepage had sprung bolt upright and was clutching at her throat.

The next moment she was crouching at the solicitor's feet.

"Save me! save me!" she implored; "don't let me die, I'm afraid to die, I deserve it. I know, I did try to kill Denis because he had ceased to love me and because I was going to lose The Towers and all the money. But I will atone, I will atone, if you will only save me. I can tell you what will counteract the poison—save me, save me, for pity's sake."

Mr. Pontifex stepped back—the diners had risen and were staring at the tall figure and the writhing form of the woman his genius had so effectually unmasked. Fearful for the physical consequences of the Frenchwoman's terror—she was bent double and shuddering violently—he said sternly:

"Listen, you are not poisoned, only tricked. Your wine-glass was as innocent as mine. I only discovered your crime to-night—I have had no time to extract the poison or to ascertain its nature. Rise, and calm yourself."

Julie Lepage leapt to her feet—a paroxysm of fury distorting her countenance. An instant she stood thus clenching her hands and gasping for breath. Then turning on her heel, she burst from the room.

* * * * *

That was the last of Julie Lepage, so far as the dwellers at The Towers were concerned. The same night, by stealth, she left the house and vanished into the unknown. Nor did all Denis Amberley's well-meant inquiries ever bring him the slightest news of her. Though she had done her best to kill him he would have seen that she did not want. But whether she lived or died they never heard.

How she had learnt the hideous lessons which she carried into practice upon Colonel Amberley cannot now be known. Mr. Pontifex, however, found that Victor Lepage, her father, had been familiar to the French police as a brilliant, but unscrupulous authority upon poisons, so that doubtless her skill was but the reflection of an even greater one.

Denis Amberley, freed from her devastating shadow, swiftly regained his health and vigour, and Mr. Pontifex was an honoured guest at his wedding. As he sat by the bride at the merry meal which followed, he ventured to ask her what reason she had had for urging upon him in their stolen first interview that Colonel Amberley should go abroad.

Gladys Amberley shook her head and peeped at him out of her pretty blue eyes. "I had no reason but instinct," she said.

"But you told me you knew," objected the solicitor deferentially.

"A woman always knows—when she is sure!" was the retort; "and I was sure that Julie—but don't let us speak of it. It was too terrible."

"Humph!" said Hugo Pontifex. "Well, he's going abroad now—specially conducted." And Gladys Amberley blushed.

R. Norman Silver.

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JULIA.

His name was really Samuel Thomas Brooks; but among his fellow employés at Messrs. Podmore and Smythe's, he was known as "Julia."

It was Jack Norris, one of the cashiers, who thus nicknamed him.

"He is so precious green! so jolly meek and mild!" observed Norris, a day or two after the arrival of the new assistant. "Whenever I look at him, I always think of an aunt of mine who lives down in Devonshire. She's a spinster, and wears spectacles. This chap Brooks certainly ought to meet her; he's turned three and twenty (told me so himself, the innocent!) and Aunt Julia's only a trifle over thirty—an ideal match!"

After that, Brooks was invariably addressed and spoken of as "Julia."

He winced slightly, when, at breakfast, Norris first hailed him by the cognomen; but by the end of the day he was used to the name, and didn't seem to mind it in the least.

Ere he had been a week at Podmore and Smythe's, he was "Julia" to everybody—from the head shopwalker down to the youngest apprentice.

There certainly wasn't much of the man about Samuel Thomas Brooks. Meekness, and a mild, even temper are excellent attributes in their way, but Brooks was meek and mild to that degree which, in this hard, unfeeling world of ours, generally earns for a man the epithets "soft" and "sawney."

Brooks had come straight from a small provincial drapery shop to the mammoth West-end emporium of Podmore and Smythe. His accent was broad, and his "greenness" in most matters something to marvel at. But he was an excellent counter-hand, thoroughly well up in his business, willing, hardworking, punctual, and never grumbled when it was necessary to put in an hour or two's labour after closing time.

Naturally, therefore, Brooks suited his employers, and naturally also, his fellow-assistants imposed upon his good nature. Unpleasant tasks among the dustiest of the top shelves, seemed always to fall to "Julia's" share; and when he had no customer to serve, he was generally to be found lending some colleague a hand. "Will you do me a favour, Julia?" was a constant query, and Brooks was never known to refuse; which was, of course, weak on his part. He got small thanks for his many kindnesses; indeed, favours from "Julia" soon came to be accepted as quite in the natural order of things, and, consequently, were not regarded as favours at all.

But if, in the shop, Brooks led the life of a slave, his existence after business hours was still worse.

The domestic arrangements of a big retail establishment, where the employés live "inside," resemble in some respects those of a boarding-school. The assistants eat their meals at long tables, presided over by the heads of departments; whilst, except that their bedrooms contain about half-a-dozen beds instead of a score or so, the school dormitory system may be said to be in vogue. Another point of resemblance is, that there are generally a few bullies, who operate with impunity on their victims. The tortures meted out by the said bullies are more of a verbal than a physical nature, albeit brute force is not entirely unknown, as new apprentices know to their cost.

As might be expected, Brooks had much to endure in an establishment like Podmore and Smythe's. He was the butt of the dinner-table; the bullies openly insulted him; the practical-jokers were continually devising fresh traps for his benefit; and the would-be wits made quite a reputation for themselves at "Julia's" expense.

Brooks never attempted to retaliate, either by word or deed. Occasionally a remark would hurt, and he would flush to the roots of his straw-coloured hair; but, as a rule, he grinned sheepishly, and affected not to mind. Altogether, what with his pallid, innocent face, his mild blue eyes, and his gentle, timid ways, Brooks was a perfect specimen of the genus "milk-sop."

One of the worst of his tormentors was Jack Norris, the cashier, who, as already related, had first dubbed the new assistant "Julia."

Now, Norris wasn't by nature a bully; as a matter of fact, he was at bottom rather a decent fellow. But being

The bullies openly insulted him.

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one of the muscular, good-looking, dashing sort himself, he couldn't, as he was often wont to declare:

"Stand namby-pamby chaps at any price."

To deal kindly with milk-sops was, in Norris' opinion, a big mistake.

"It only makes 'em softer," he would say. "Treat 'em roughly—have no mercy, that's the only way to make men of 'em. You know what I mean, slang 'em right and left! When the meek innocents get to know that they've left their mothers' apron-strings, they now and again pluck up a bit, and learn to take their own part in the world. Now, this chap Julia hasn't the spirit of a mouse. He doesn't smoke nor drink, never goes to a music-hall, and allows every youngester in the place to insult him. He's twenty-three, and is as timorous as a girl of half his age. Bah! it's downright disgusting."

Norris lost no opportunity of practising the treatment he recommended for the cure of milk-soppiness. He was forever badgering Brooks, and, as they both slept in the same room, the victim's sufferings commenced first thing in the morning, and only ended when Norris dropped off to sleep at night.

In addition to verbal persecution, Brooks had to endure "apple-pie" beds, hair-brushes between the sheets, and various other tricks of the school-dormitory order.

Nothing served, however, to rouse him into a display of spirit. He suffered every indignity to be heaped upon him with a patient meekness which exasperated Jack Norris to such a degree, that he became more brutal in his methods. Frequently he aroused "Julia" by douching him with ice-cold water; while, on more than one occasion, he hurled a boot at his victim with highly-painful results.

But it was no good. Brooks simply could not be induced to retaliate, nor even to show a momentary flash of temper. And never once did he lodge a complaint against Norris or any of the others by whom he was so systematically persecuted.

* * * * *

Brooks had lived this dog's life for about three months, when a change began to be noticed in Jack Norris. Usually of a vivacious, not to say noisy, disposition, the cashier suddenly grew moody and taciturn. He stayed out at night later than ever, and frequently returned somewhat unsteady on his legs; but instead of relating his evenings' adventures and boasting of his conquests, as was formerly his wont, he now rarely opened his lips. He even neglected "Julia," a lack of attention for which that individual was duly grateful.

The general opinion was, that the course of Norris' love affairs was not running too smoothly; and as he grew more and more reserved, Podmore and Smythe's young men whispered to each other that the cashier must have been very badly hit indeed.

Meanwhile, life became a trifle more endurable to Brooks. He was, it is true, still badgered at the dinner-table and imposed upon in the shop; but in the bedroom, at any rate, he enjoyed peace. For Norris had always ruled the dormitory, and now that he was in a perpetual state of gloom, the other assistants who slept there, generally went to bed in silence.

One night Brooks retired to rest at the early hour of nine. No one else was in the dormitory, and from past experience Brooks knew that the five neighbouring beds were not likely to be occupied until midnight or thereabouts.

For it was Wednesday, a day on which Messrs. Podmore and Smythe's huge establishment was practically deserted between the hours of 3 and 12 p.m.

As, however, Brooks had no friends to visit, and did not patronise places of amusement, early-closing day

"Hand over that revolver!"

simply meant for him an afternoon stroll, an evening devoted to writing home, and an early retirement to rest.

On this night, he was lying in bed, thinking of nothing in particular, and waiting for Morpheus to overtake him, when the door suddenly opened, and someone entered.

There was only a feeble glimmer of gas burning in the room, and for a moment Brooks failed to recognise the intruder. But when the latter halted and sat down on the second bed from the door, Brooks saw that it was Jack Norris.

The cashier presently stooped, and pulled from beneath the bed a small portmanteau. This he hastily unlocked and opened, and took out something which he placed in his pocket; then he re-locked the bag, shoved it under the bedstead again, and, apparently oblivious of Brooks's presence, went out, leaving the door wide open.

Brooks watched him traverse the passage, and commence the ascent of a flight of stairs which led to the attic regions.

Then, like a flash, he sprang out of bed, drew on a few articles of clothing, and followed. He had caught a

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glimpse of the glittering "something" which had gone into Norris' pocket.

Reaching the landing above, he halted a moment; then, hearing a footstep, he stealthily crept on until he came to an attic that was used as a place of storage for all sorts of lumber. The door was open and the room was flooded with the moonlight which poured through the window.

And, facing the window, stood Norris, his right arm raised, and the shining muzzle of a revolver pressed against his temple. His finger was already on the trigger, when Brooks the timid made a spring, clutched at Norris' wrist, and dexterously snatched the weapon from his grasp.

"Here, I say; this won't do, you know," he coolly remarked. "Suicide's cowardly."

"Julia!" gasped the cashier in astonishment; then added hoarsely: "Give me that pistol, Julia, and clear out. It's all up with me—I've nothing to live for."

"I shan't," retorted Brooks, very firmly. "Don't be a coward, Norris. What's the matter?"

"Hand over that revolver, d'you hear?"

Norris was now trembling violently and clutching at the window-sash for support.

"I won't!"

"You must!"

"I won't!" repeated Brooks. "Come! tell me what's the matter. Perhaps I can help you, Norris."

"You're a likely one to help me, even if you could, after the way I've treated you."

"Never mind about that. Tell me what's wrong."

And straightway Norris blurted out his miserable story.

His cash—or rather Podmore and Smythe's cash—was £18 short, and on the following day his accounts were going to be audited. For some time past he had been "borrowing" occasional sovereigns from the cash-box, manipulating the entries in his books in such a way that, in the ordinary course of events, the shortage in his balance might have gone undetected for years. But about twelve months ago, one of Podmore and Smythe's cashiers had been "found out," and since then audits had been of more frequent occurrence than formerly.

During the last few weeks, Norris had lived in constant dread of discovery, and now he had received a hint that a "surprise audit" would take place on the following day. Unless he could make good the deficit, prosecution for embezzlement was inevitable; but although he spent the afternoon in trying to borrow the amount from various acquaintances (a publican or two among them) he had failed to secure the requisite loan.

"Every man-jack refused," moaned the wretched Norris, "although most of them could have have easily spared the money. Nice friends!" he added bitterly.

"The audit will take place to-morrow, you say?" asked Brooks.

"Yes, old Crosby, the ledger-clerk, told me. So give me that revolver, Brooks, and go. I'm sure to be found out, and Podmore is certain to prosecute; he had no mercy on young Fuller, and he'll have none on me. It's ruin—disgrace! I can't face it, and—and it would kill my mother!"

Brooks was silent a moment; then he observed:

"If I let you have the money between ten and half-past to-morrow morning, will it be in time?"

"Yes; but surely, Ju—Brooks, you don't really mean that you—"

"Let's go to bed," interrupted the other, "I'll get the money for you without fail."

And Brooks kept his promise. Obtaining an hour's leave of absence next morning, he rushed to the nearest post-office, and drew out by telegraph the sum of £18 from his savings bank account. He handed the money to Norris without a word, and, a few minutes afterwards the auditors appeared on the scene.

* * * * *

There are no two closer friends in Podmore and Smythe's emporium, than Brooks and Norris. The latter repaid the loan long ago, now lives strictly within his income, and is steadily saving money. Brooks is no more known as "Julia"—Norris quickly put a stop to that, and when the pair suddenly became so chummy, the assistants deemed it prudent to let Brooks alone. Some day the two mean to run a business of their own in partnership.

F. C. D.

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THE LION'S WARS

The War in Scinde.

1842-1843.

WHATEVER our merits and demerits as a nation may be, it must be confessed that in the erection of that noble fabric known as the British Empire we have been greatly favoured by fortune. By the war of 1842-3 we added the important province of Scinde to our dominions in India.

Scinde is bounded on the south by the Arabian Sea, and would have constituted, had it passed into the hands of a foreign power, a serious danger to our position in India. We have much cause, therefore, to be grateful that its conquest had not to be undertaken by us to-day.

The great province of Scinde, which has for its neighbours Beluchistan and the Punjab, has had a chequered career. Centuries ago it formed part of the great Mohammedan Empire of the East. In 1756 it was conquered by the Afghans, but in 1829 the Beluchis, aided by some hill tribes who called themselves Ameers, recovered their freedom, and raised the leader of the Taipur tribe to the position of authority.

To secure his dynasty this chief divided his dominions amongst his brothers and kinsmen, and the rivalries and jealousies to which this arrangement gave rise led to the boundaries of the country being gradually extended till they touched the frontiers of British India. These encroachments would not have been resented had they not placed the entire navigation of the Indus in their hands.

So many historians have been wont to denounce our conquest of Scinde in language of which "No fouler blot stains the pages of our history than the conquest of Scinde," is a fair sample, that one naturally expects to find that the war we are about to deal with was deliberately entered on for the purpose of annexing the country. The facts, however, show that the exact contrary is the truth.

Even if Britain had provoked the war, she might easily have shielded herself behind the plea that the conquest of the country was necessary, on account of the turbulence of the inhabitants imperilling the peace of India; but the Juts and Beluchis brought the war on themselves by deliberately breaking the treaties into which they had entered, the violations being of so grave a character, that a great blow would have been struck at our prestige if we had allowed the infringement to go unheeded. Not that we declared war on them for their perfidy. As a matter of fact they anticipated us by commencing hostilities themselves.

It is only fair, however, to state that the Beluchis had what they considered a great grievance against us. To protect our merchants residing in the country we had insisted on the Beluchis receiving a British Resident at the capital.

Now, whilst it is true that the people greatly resented the presence of this official, regarding him not as an envoy, but as a spy, they had had ample proof that he was nothing of the kind.

Our intercourse with Scinde was no new thing. In 1799 the people agreed to receive our represen-

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tative, and till 1830, although his presence provoked some friction, no actual outbreak occurred. In 1830 the Residency was besieged, and after a desperate fight our envoy was forced to quit the country.

Although the Beluchis by this time knew perfectly well what the presence of a diplomatic representative implied, they agreed in a treaty entered into two years later to again receive a Resident at Hyderabad. By this treaty they also bound themselves to assist the peaceful trading of our merchants, and full power to trade and navigate the Indus.

The Beluchis, it would seem, conceded these privileges not out of any love for the British, but because they feared the consequences of a refusal.

When disaster overtook us in Afghanistan, the Beluchis, never dreaming that we should recover from such an overwhelming calamity as the destruction of an entire army, thought they could now defy us with impunity. They ill-treated our merchants, seized their goods, and stopped the navigation of the Indus.

The breaches culminated at last in 1842 in an unprovoked attack on the Resident's house. For over four hours a handful of British soldiers kept at bay a howling mob, who, maddened by their hatred of the British, dashed again and again up the inclosures leading to the house, only to be hurled back with tremendous loss by the steady fire of our men.

Matters now assumed so threatening an aspect that the settlement of the affair was placed in the hands of Sir Charles J. Napier, an officer of invincible determination, and of the very highest military capacity. The first thing Sir Charles did was to insist that, as the existing treaty had been broken, Mir Ruskuin, the aged Prince of Upper Scinde, must as a punishment sign a more drastic treaty, the penalty of refusing being deposition and banishment.

The enemies of Britain declare that Napier induced Ali Mourad, the Prince of Lower Scinde, to persuade Mir Ruskuin to refuse to sign the treaty on the understanding that if he supported British interests Ruskuin should be deposed and Ali Mourad recognised as the head of the Ameers of Scinde. But unless it can be shown beyond the possibility of a doubt that Charles Napier was privy to the plot which led to Ruskuin seeking refuge in flight, the charge falls to the ground.

Napier in due course did depose Ruskuin and recognise as his successor Ali Mourad, but that does not prove he had been playing a double game. If Ali Mourad was his confederate it is strange that the moment Ruskuin disappeared, Napier, in anticipation of a rising, should have decided on attempting the capture of the desert fort of Emamghur, which the Beluchis declared was as "Impregnable as Heaven." Napier's enemies point to his seizure of this place as further evidence of his guilt. We consider it a proof of his innocence.

If Ali Mourad was his confederate, why should he plunge into the heart of a wilderness so drear that he had to take his own water with him lest the wells were poisoned. Napier knew that the garrison at Emamghur was four times as numerous as any force he could bring, and unless he regarded Ali Mourad as a traitor, this desert expedition was an act of stupendous folly.

The greatest hardships were experienced by the little force as they journeyed through the lonely wilderness. Their water skins soon gave out, and they had to dig wells, and nearly all their food was stolen. But as Napier wrote, "there never was such a fellow as the British soldier, he laughed and joked all the way."

At last the eight days' march came to an end. The soldiers braced themselves up for what they thought would prove a stiff piece of work, and were greatly disappointed when they found there was no enemy to fight. The garrison had evacuated the place two days before.

The fortress which consisted of a strong inner fort surrounded by walls forty feet high and flanked by towers, Napier blew up. The troops, having come thus far, would have liked to have continued the march on the chance of coming up with the garrison, but Napier, thinking that the news of what he had done would strike terror into the Beluchis, at once set out for the Indus.

During Sir Charles' absence, events had reached a crisis in Hyderabad. The Beluchi chiefs, who hated Ali Mourad, offered to sign the obnoxious treaty if a clause were inserted, admitting that Ali Mourad had betrayed Mir Ruskuin. The promptness with which the Resident declined this proposal so angered the chiefs, that he had to literally fight his way back to the Residency, which was situated about three miles from the city.

Being informed that the Beluchis had sworn on the Koran to fight the British, he barricaded his house. It was well he did so. At dawn next day all the roads leading to the Residency were crowded by a yelling mob of fanatics, who soon let it be known that if the inmates fell into their hands no mercy would be shown.

Fortunately the Resident had taken the precaution before Sir Charles Napier's departure to borrow a few soldiers of the 22nd. For over four hours this handful of British redcoats kept at bay a mob composed of perhaps the greatest desperadoes in all Asia. After spending the entire day in vain attempts to blow up the place, the Beluchis at length lost heart and retired.

As such an outrage, if overlooked, would have greatly lowered our prestige, war was at once declared.

Knowing the value of time, Sir Charles Napier made up his mind to strike promptly and strike hard. By a forced march he arrived at Muttaree on February 16th, 1843, and, ascertaining that the Ameers and their forces were posted at Meanee, ten miles off, he rested a few hours and marched through during the night hoping to take them by surprise in the morning. It was a hazardous enterprise even if he succeeded, for his little force only numbered 2,800 men with twelve guns, whilst of the Ameer army of 40,000, over 20,000 were cavalry. But Sir Charles Napier was a general with brains, and brains count in war.

He had the most profound belief in himself, and the greatest confidence in the British soldier, and therefore regarded defeat as out of the question. He laughed when an officer told him during the night that the Beluchi horde was nearly 30,000 strong.

"Well," he said, "have we not got 802 cavalry, all good men who understand their business? They are in good spirits, so am I. They will fight on a smooth plain. They love a smooth plain, as the Beluchis will soon discover. Only 40,000 Beluchis? Why the triumph is certain. Three hours' sleep and then prepare for victory."

What a dauntless soldier this great general was. He sauntered out of his tent next morning, and although a long survey convinced him that the Beluchis held a position of extraordinary strength, he chatted and laughed with his staff during the hasty morning meal, as if the victory were already won.

Surely the enemy could not have been more securely

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Drawn by] [*C. Lawson Wood.*

British and Beluchis, horse and foot, rushed in one confused mass down the steep sides of the river bed.

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posted. For 1,200 yards, the Beluchi front lined the deep nullah or dry bed of the Fullailee, and to storm the position it would be necessary to cross the dry bed and then climb a steep bank in face of a heavy fire. The flanks were not so strong. Screened by heavy jungle they afforded good cover for an attacking force. The Beluchis, conscious of their weakness, posted the bulk of their force at either end, leaving but few men to guard the centre.

As each wing was six miles from the centre, Sir Charles calculated that a couple of feigned attacks at both ends might keep the enemy sufficiently busy to enable him to break through the centre. To accomplish this, he planted his waggons at a spot about a mile to the right of the centre, just opposite the village of Kaltree, and placing behind them all his native troops, instructed them to occasionally show themselves, in order to lead the Beluchis to imagine that an attack might be expected at that point.

Taking advantage of a dip near the river bed, Sir Charles then stole with his British soldiers to where the Beluchis had built a long high wall, evidently in the belief that a wall had only to be high enough to constitute secure protection.

Sir Charles Napier determined to make his attack here, because he judged from the fact of the wall not being loopholed that no resistance would be offered. The moment the order was given our men bounded into the river bed, up the bank, across the intervening space, and scaled the wall like cats, thus cutting the enemy's position in two.

We have dwelt on these details as they show what an enormous saving of life can be effected in war if the conduct of operations is intrusted only to generals of proved capacity. Nineteen out of twenty British generals would have assailed the wings and lost hundreds of lives. Napier being a general of the brainy type effected a lodgment without losing a man.

The Beluchis, of course, bore down on us when they learnt the truth. Indeed they pressed on us in such numbers, that the 22nd, weary of killing and driven back at last by the crushing pressure, began to give way, but when Napier rode up the lost ground was recovered.

Having got into their position, it was Napier's plan to drive the enemy from the river bank on to the plain, so that his cavalry might take them in hand. The British force was now reduced to 2,500 men, and to drive the enemy from a position twelve miles long it was necessary that the men should be formed into line. The Beluchis were good fighters, but such was the prestige of the British that long and attentuated as the line was we steadily drove before us on that eventful day the whole of the vast Beluchi army till they debouched on to the plains.

Then Napier let loose his 800 horse. For two hours our troopers rode up and down and in and out of the vast Beluchi horde till the plains were drenched in blood.

Napier's object was to so disorganise the force as to compel it to surrender. He did not succeed in this. Our cavalry, after plying their swords for a couple of hours, struck at last such deadly terror into the hearts of the dark-skinned warriors that greatly to Napier's annoyance they took to flight. We lost about 250 men, the Beluchis over 8,000.

Failing to capture their army, Napier was resolved that no time should be given for them to recover. So he sent word to the Ameers that unless they surrendered unconditionally he would storm Hyderabad and hand over the city to his soldiers to sack.

The chiefs knew that our Army was ridiculously small, but was not their general, as one of the Ameers pointed out, equal to 100,000 more. So they humbly promised to submit. The Ameers sent him the keys of their fortress and waited on him in person in order to lay at his feet their jewelled swords. With that high born courtesy which has always distinguished the Napiers the swords were returned.

A little later the British Army marched through the streets of Hyderabad. The Union Jack was hoisted, the Army sang "God Save the Queen," and then if report is to be believed whiled away the evening by a little looting. They would not have been able to indulge that weakness had not Napier's attention been directed elsewhere.

One of the Ameers, Sheer Mohammed, the Lion of Meerpur had not submitted.

Knowing that the triumph of the British could not be considered complete so long as any of the Ameers remained in the field, and especially one with an army of 20,000, Sir Charles at once—to the disgust of his men who were getting intensely interested in the valuables of the city—determined to march against the unconquered chieftain. So, after sending for reinforcements which came in such numbers that he was able to leave a garrison of 1,000 men in Hyderabad, he left the city in March 1843 at the head of 5,000 men.

At Dubba, six miles from the capital, he came in touch with Mohammed and 35,000 dusky warriors. The Beluchis with an instinct as keen as the Boer for a strong defensive position had again availed themselves of the dry water courses with which Scinde abounds. Their wings as before were protected by thick jungles, and on the edge of the bank skirting the river bed, which was 8ft. deep, a strong rampart had been erected.

Napier, after reconnoitring the position, held converse with a native, and learnt to his annoyance that were the Beluchis driven from their fort position they could retreat behind another river bed 42ft. wide and 17ft. deep in the rear. As the village of Dubba is in the centre and all the houses were loopholed it was rendered unsafe to assault, Napier determined before ordering an advance to lay it in ruins.

Anticipating that the force occupying the village would retreat on its becoming untenable to the right, General Napier sent his cavalry in that direction. Our troopers, with their sabres gleaming in the sunshine and uttering loud shouts, galloped to where the Beluchi soldiers were streaming away from the village, and burst on them with such force that in their wild flight they ran at headlong speed to the second nullah, in the belief that our men dare not gallop down into a river bed 17ft. deep and up again the other side.

But we did. British and Beluchis, horse and foot, rushed in one confused mass down the steep sides of the bed, but the ascent on the other side was so precipitous that the Beluchis had time to line the parapet at the top before our men appeared in sight. The fight here was so desperate that Napier himself joined in the fray. His escapes were wonderful; a bullet shattered the hilt of his sword without injuring the hand that gripped it, another passed through his headgear, and the explosion of a Beluchi magazine close to where he was fighting singed his clothes. Yet he escaped without a scratch.

But the issue had grown uncertain. A general advance had been delayed owing to the enemy reoccupying the dismantled village for the sake of the cover afforded

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by the *débris*. It took the detachment sent to rout them out so long to accomplish their task that Napier began to think that they had failed.

The British soldier is an extraordinary person. He either rushes at the foe at headlong speed, hurrahing loudly, or marches on to the battle field with the calmness and steadiness associated with sham fights, drills, and parades. On this occasion our men marched, after clearing the village, back to the scene of battle in complete silence. They descended the bank, crossed the bed of the river, and mounted the other side before their comrades were aware of their presence. It was the sudden and precipitate retreat of the Beluchis which caused the delighted general to turn round and ask:

"Have you all been struck dumb?"

The fugitives endeavoured to make for the Indus but our troopers shepherded them with the nicest skill in the direction of the wilderness.

The completeness of the victory was not to be estimated by the number of the slain, although the casualty lists where heavy. The Beluchi killed amounted to 5,000. The demoralisation which set in after the battle was due to our having captured twenty-seven standards and all their guns. Our own casualties were trifling, being under 300 officers and men.

Unfortunately the Lion of Beluchistan escaped and managed to reach Meerpur.

He was hard at work reorganizing his force when Napier, hearing of his whereabouts, marched straight from the battlefield, to which he had returned after the rout, to Meerpur, forty miles away and burst on the Lion with such suddenness that Sheer Mohammed and his followers had only just time to leave the city by the west gate as our troops entered by the east.

The courage of the Lion being now somewhat shaken he fled precipitately with his followers to Omercote, his fortress in the desert.

But Napier was quickly on his track, the pursuit becoming so hot as soon as our men had struck the trail, that Sheer again took to flight leaving the fortress in our hands.

This happened exactly four days after the battle of Dubba during which time our men (although the heat wave had risen) covered over a hundred miles of ground. One incident of this march has a splendid significance for us to-day.

It shows that although we are a conquering race, so beneficent is our sway that the people we rule over do not regard us as most natives do their conquerors.

The heat of the wilderness in which the Lion had reared his fort was so intense, and water so scarce, that the native soldiers voluntarily offered to carry the muskets and kits of their white companions.

When the little army came, on the third day's march, on a water carrier, not a native soldier would touch a drop till the thirst of the British had been assuaged.

After the capture of Omercote, the army was formed into flying columns, the scattered bands of the Beluchis being hunted down with such vigour that all resistance gradually died away.

A few months later Scinde was formally annexed, thus adding another stone to that stately edifice, Our Indian Empire.

[NEXT WEEK: "*The Great Sikh Wars.*"]

SHORT STORIES THAT MAKE YOU LAUGH.

We devote every week space in *Short Stories* to pithy, humorous anecdotes similar to those which appear in these columns. A prize of £1 1s. will be sent to the reader who submits the best storyette this week, and a copy of "Guilty Gold," by Headon Hill, to each of those whose attempts are used. The anecdotes may be either original or selected; in the latter case, the source MUST be stated. Attempts must reach the Storyette Editor, *Short Stories* Office, Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., by Monday, March 11th. Post-cards only, please.

The Prize of One Guinea for the best Storyette has been won this week by Mrs. EATON, of 42 Hartington Road, West Derby, Liverpool, for the Storyette entitled "Ingenuous."

Ingenuous.

HE was a charming little fellow of four, pretty in his ways, good to look at, but as naughty as could be. He sat on the bottom step kicking his fat little legs, and refusing utterly to obey his father, who had told him to go upstairs several times in increasing degrees of severity.

After a few minutes of this clashing of wills, his exasperated parent picked him up somewhat suddenly, carried him, sat him down very firmly on a chair in his room, and then went out and shut the door.

Silence reigned. Not a sound from him for at least half-an-hour.

Then the door was opened, and a sweet little voice called out:

"Father, have you got over your tantrum yet, for I should like to come down?"

MRS. E.

A Notice.

THE churchwarden's quarterly meeting will be held every six weeks instead of half-yearly, as usual.

Next Tuesday being Ash Wednesday, an open air meeting of the congregation will be held in the vestry to determine what colour the church shall be white-washed.

C. R. S.

Tackling a Difficulty.

DURING the railway strike a new hand was driving a passenger train which should have stopped at Berwick. But, being unable to use the air-brake, he passed the platform. Having reversed the engine, he started back and passed it again. Reversing once more, he made a similar mistake.

"Let her stand, Jock," shouted the station-master. "Let her stand, we'll shift the station."

F. L.

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Not a Bull.

A member of a certain company of the Imperial Yeomanry, who had been born within the sound of Bow Bells, and was accustomed to hold forth to his comrades in the choicest Cockney dialect, was one day engaged in scouting with another member of the force. He was expressing great contempt for Boer marksmanship, and had just given the opinion that "they couldn't make a bull's-eye at fifty yards," when a Boer bullet, fired at over 1,000 yards, suddenly grazed the side of his head and stretched him senseless on the ground.

His only remark to his friend on regaining consciousness was: "Ahter!" which, being interpreted, was understood to signify "Outer," and thus to convey a further reflection on the skill of the Boer!

J. G. B.

All that Glitters is not Gold.

Some soldiers just returned from South Africa were discussing the character and deeds of ex-President Kruger, when one of them, a somewhat pompous and self-important sergeant, said:

"I don't suppose there's a man in the world who is as fond of money as old Kruger; he doesn't care what it is or how he gets it, so long as it's money, money, money."

"I'll bet you a shilling," retorted an Irish private, "that ye're wrong. There are some kinds of money he doesn't like at all, at all."

"Done!" cried the other, "prove it."

"Well," replied the Hibernian, "He's just got a sovereign from England, and a check (cheque) from the Emperor of Germany, an' I'm blowed if he wished for either of 'em."

The sergeant had to pay up.

R. F.

He Helped Himself.

A gentleman was driving along a lonely country road the other day, when he heard loud cries for help proceeding from a neighbouring wood. He hitched his horse and ran to the assistance of the person who seemed to be in distress. Upon entering the wood he was surprised and shocked to find a man who was securely tied to a tree.

"What is the matter here?" he said in astonishment.

"Oh, sir," replied the poor fellow, "I'm so glad you have come. A few hours ago I was knocked down by some tramps who rifled my pockets, and after stealing everything I had except a pocket-book in my inside vest pocket, which they fortunately overlooked, bound me to this tree and decamped."

"The scoundrels!" ejaculated the new-comer. "And so the wretches robbed you, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Took everything you had except one pocket-book in your inside pocket, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"The villains! And then they tied you tightly here—so tightly that you cannot escape?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I think I'll take the pocket-book the other fellows left."

And he did.

D. R.

Paid Better.

Saturday morning and the barber very busy.

"I'd rather shave ten Germans than one Englishman."

The rubicund foreigner in the chair smiled broadly through the lather.

"Goot," he chuckled. "Dot vos right; but vy?"

The barber took a firmer hold upon his victim's nose as he replied:

"Ten Germans pays me one and threepence—one Englishman only 1½d."

And you could have heard the thermometer drop.

A. K.

Had Him There.

A commercial traveller walked into a Post Office the other day, and scribbling off a telegram of eighteen words, handed it, together with ninepence, to the clerk. The latter rapidly scanned the telegram, and took from his drawer two stamps, 6d. and 3d., respectively, which the traveller was to affix to the form.

The traveller, however, did not affix them, but stared at the clerk.

"You must affix the stamps on yourself, sir," exclaimed the clerk.

"Oh, no, I musn't," retorted the commercial, in feigned annoyance.

"You have to, sir, I can show it you in print."

"Nonsense; let me see, then."

"Here you are!" and the clerk read from a large book that the "sender of the telegram must himself affix the stamps to the form."

"Ah! there you are," vociferated the commercial. "The stamps must be stuck on the form, not on myself. See?"

As the roars of laughter issued from the other end of the room the abashed clerk muttered words of deadly import in a low tone to himself.

F. W.

AN ELEGANT AND CHOICE PRODUCTION.

THE LADY'S MAGAZINE.

March Number Ready. 6d.

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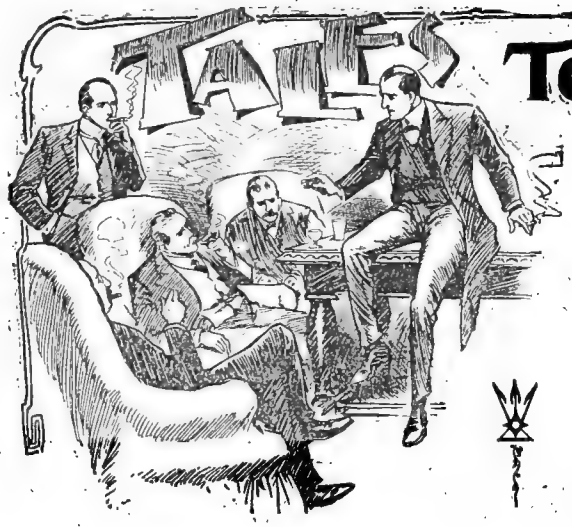

TOLD "OFF DUTY."

[You probably don't know the "Stand-Easy" Club. It isn't in the directory, and you might live next door to the place for years without knowing of its existence by that name. It isn't a conventional club; there is no subscription, and there is no register of members. It is merely a room in a quiet, orderly, and select hostelry in Westminster, where, by common consent, a number of officials of all kinds meet when "off duty." There you may find detectives from Scotland Yard, near by; firemen, commissionaires, a soldier or two, and maybe a doctor from St. Thomas' Hospital or elsewhere. A motley crowd they would be if they wore their uniforms, but at the "Stand-Easy" uniforms are a rarity, "mufti" being the unwritten rule. The result is a gathering of quiet, well-behaved, and well-dressed men. Saturday night is the time when one sees the biggest muster, for then it is the custom for one member to regale the company with a story, the story being, as a rule, an account of some incident in the teller's own career.]

An Actor's Madness.

Told by the LIMELIGHT MAN.

WHEN, a few evenings ago, a yarn was vociferously demanded of Sam Phipps, that individual looked exceedingly astonished, and, had there been a clear course to the door, he would probably have made a bolt for it. But there wasn't a clear course, and from the way in which the other members had managed to hedge Mr. Phipps in, and from the suspiciously-unanimous manner in which they had called upon him for a story, it really seemed as though the whole thing had been arranged.

"It's a put-up job, I reckon," observed Phipps, with a good-humoured grin.

"Quite right, Sam—so it is," candidly retorted one of the members. "You see, it 'ain't often we have the pleasure o' your company early enough in the evenin' for a yarn. Midnight's your usual time for droppin' in—just when most of us are thinkin' about goin' home to bed. This is the first chance you've give us since the 'Pantheon' was shut up for alterations, pretty nigh a twelvemonth ago. If the new piece you're bringin' out catches on, you'll most likely dodge us for another twelvemonth—and that's why the wink went round directly you came in this evenin'. My motto is, 'never miss opportunities—' speshully rare 'uns!"

Sam Phipps was attached to the theatrical profession. His name did not figure in the "cast," and audiences never saw or heard him; but, nevertheless, he held a post of some responsibility at that popular home of melodrama—the Pantheon Theatre.

He was, in fact, "Mr. Limes," the gentleman who, perched aloft in the wings, supplies the "conflagration's ruddy glare," in fire-scenes, and follows the persecuted heroine, the gallant hero, or the dastardly villain about the stage with a most accommodating stream of rather unnatural moonlight. Pending the production of a new play, then in rehearsal, the "Pantheon" was closed; so Sam Phipps, having an evening to spare, had decided to spend it at the Club.

Seeing he was fairly trapped, and there was nothing for it but to "oblige," Sam cleared his throat and began:

"Ever since I was a lad, I've earned my living in theatres. My father was a stage carpenter, and my mother a 'dresser'; so I may say I was born in the profession. I started as call-boy at the old Universe Theatre, and when I grew too big for the job, helped in the property-room for a time.

"When I was promoted to the 'limes,' I felt mighty important, I can assure you; for at the 'Universe,' they went in for nothin' else but sensational dramas, and limelight of all colours was used most liberal. A man wants his wits about him to work the limes as they should be worked. He's got to follow things very carefully indeed, and very often he can fairly mess up a scene through picking up his cues a second too late or two soon.

"So I had some excuse for fancyin' myself a trifle when I became 'Mr. Limes' at the Universe Theatre. It was a responsible job, and a tryin' job; but I very soon cottoned to the business, and after my first night in the wings, when I made a blunder or two owin' to nervousness, I gave the boss every satisfaction.

"At that time the Universe company was one of the best in London. If the piece we put on was of the excitin' sort they wanted some actin', let me tell you. Some folks think fit to sneer at melodramas—well, all I says is, the plays at the old Universe was plays, with plenty o' body in 'em, not the milk-and-watery stuff that's reckoned so jolly clever nowadays.

"Every member of the Universe company was a real artiste. There was Mr. Herbert Verney, who always played the hero, a fine, manly young chap, as clever as he was good-lookin', and without a morsel o' conceit about him.

"Miss Lambert—Inez Lambert she was on the bills—was the leadin' lady. She had barely turned twenty, but, on her first appearance in public at a trial matinée,

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had made a big hit, and was at once snapped up by our manager to play principal parts. And splendid she played 'em too! the way she held the audience by her actin' was a caution. Off the stage she was a quiet sweet-tempered young lady, with a pleasant word for everybody—very different from some leadin' ladies I've known.

"The chap as played the villain styled himself Dudley Mostyn. Now in my experience I've generally found that actors who, on the stage, play wicked characters, are, in real life, the most affable gents you could wish to meet. But this Mostyn was a scowlin', surly sort both on and off the boards. He'd bully and storm at us stage-hands for the least little thing, and the look that used to come into his queer, dark eyes when he was in his tantrums often made me feel quite creepy and uncomfortable.

"You may guess Dudley Mostyn wasn't very popular with the other members o' the company. In fact, with one exception, it was a rare thing for him to speak a word to any of 'em when he was off the stage. That one exception was Miss Inez Lambert. Her, he was always a-pesterin' with his attentions. He would stand at the wings, waitin' for her to make her exit, and try to do the agreeable in his surly way. But it was easy to see that she not only disliked the chap, but was reg'lar frightened of him.

"However, nothin' particular happened until one night, when Mostyn stopped Miss Lambert just as she was leavin' the theatre, and, takin' her a bit rough by the arm, told her he meant to say all that was in his mind. With that, he starts to talk about lovin' her madly, and then bluntly asked her to be his wife. The stage-door keeper overheard it all, and told us afterwards.

"'Release my arm, sir!' was all the frightened young lady could reply.

"'Not till you promise!' says Mostyn. 'I can't live without you, Inez! If you refuse me, I swear no one else shall have you. Promise! promise!'

"'Are you mad, Mr. Mostyn?' answers Miss Lambert, strugglin' to free herself.

"Then she caught sight of the man's face, and somethin' in its expression must have terrified her, for she gave a cry for help.

"The stage-door keeper thought it about time to interfere; but, just then, out comes Herbert Verney, the 'juvenile lead.' Seein' how matters stood, he rushes up to Mostyn, and catching him by the collar, says:

"'You cowardly brute! What d'you mean by this?'

"Mostyn instantly lets go o' Miss Lambert, and hits out at Verney. But the young chap was too quick for him, and next moment Mostyn was sprawlin' on the ground, Verney havin' landed him one just between the eyes.

"By the time he got on his feet again, several members of the company had gathered round, I saw Mostyn myself; he face was white as a sheet, and his eyes flashed with fury. All he did, however, was to look hard at Verney, and say very quietly:

"'You shall pay for this, you cur!' after which he walked away just as he might have done in a blessed drama.

The next moment Mostyn was sprawling on the ground.

"Of course, the manager of the Universe heard about the affair, and at first he thought about sackin' Mostyn. But Mostyn was a grand actor, and it wasn't easy just then to find a man to fill his place. So he stayed on, and as he didn't attempt to molest Miss Lambert again the matter gradually blew over.

"Two or three months went by, and at last notices went up for *Secret Foes*, which piece had been runnin' for nearly a year. About the same time, the news went round that Herbert Verney and Inez Lambert had agreed to get spliced as soon as the play was withdrawn, and then go honeymoonin' until they was wanted for the new autumn production.

"The news didn't affect Dudley Mostyn much—at least, if it did, he didn't show it. He went through his part in *Secret Foes* in fine style—and what a part his was, to be sure! The character he took was that of a mysterious Frenchman, named Leon Girard, who was such a murderin' sort o' fiend that he was also known as 'The Destroyer.'

"All through the piece this precious villain was busy makin' trouble for Cecil Forster, the handsome young English hero, and of course, as generally happens in dramas, both of 'em loved the same beautiful gal. I don't need to mention that Mr. Verney played the hero, and Miss Lambert the beautiful gal.

"Now, in the last act of *Secret Foes* Leon Girard and Cecil Forster have a big scene

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to themselves, which ends in the villain dashin' what he thinks to be vitriol into the hero's eyes. But it isn't vitriol, for a foreign lady whom 'The Destroyer' has wronged, has managed to substitute a little bottle of harmless water for the one containing the vitriol.

"Well, the last night of 'Secret Foes' arrived, and there was a tolerable-full house to witness the performance. There wasn't none o' the slackness you sometimes see at such a time. Actors and actresses did their work as though it was the opening night of the piece. Dudley Mostyn, especially, was in tip-top form.

"But, as the play went on, it suddenly struck me that there was somethin' very strange about the chap. He acted first-rate, as I've said, but there seemed to be somethin' more than actin' in the expression of his eye and the curious twitchin' of his features.

"The curtain went up for the last act, and I was gettin' my limes ready for use, when I noticed Mostyn standin' just underneath me, a-waitin' to make his entrance. There wasn't anythin' unusual in that, o' course; but about his behaviour there was. Forgettin' that 'Mr. Limes' was only a few feet above him, Mostyn kept on sayin' softly to himself: 'She shall marry a blind man!—she shall marry a blind man!'

"Over and over again he repeated them words, and I could see that, under his 'make-up,' his face was workin' like a maniac's.

"Presently, he gets his cue and goes on for his big scene with the hero. It was a dark scene—that is to say, the footlights was lowered and I had to turn the white 'lime' on the pair as they faced each other in the middle o' the stage.

"As they stood there quarrellin', I happened to catch a glimpse o' Mostyn's eyes. The look there was in 'em almost made me drop my box. I ain't no hand at descriptions—all I can say is, that if ever there was murder in a man's eyes, there was in Mostyn's.

"A minute or two passed; then, as the end of the scene approached, 'The Destroyer' gave a screech of laughter, and whipped out of his pocket the little bottle which he supposes to hold vitriol.

"It may have been the laugh that did it. He had never laughed in that awful way before. But whatever it was, I no sooner heard the laugh and see him with the bottle in his hand, than I understood the true meanin' o' them words as wasn't in the play—'She shall marry a blind man!'

"He had his fingers round the cork, and, in another moment, he would have pitched the contents o' the bottle into Verney's eyes; but before he could do so, I suddenly turned the red limelight full on his face.

"The strong glare dazed him, and he took a step or two backwards to escape it. But I kept the light full on him, and whispered to one o' my mates below:

"'Ring down, Joe, and collar that chap Mostyn!'

"The curtain came down with a rattle, and a couple o' the scene-shifters got hold of Mostyn, who shouted and struggled like a madman. Then I was called upon to explain my queer conduct."

The strong glare dazed him, and he took a step backward to escape it.

Sam Phipps paused a moment, and resumed:

"It turned out to be exactly what I thought. The bottle was found to contain not water, but vitriol—enough of it to eat away a dozen pair of eyes!

"Mostyn was taken straight from the theatre to a lunatic asylum. He died a few months after—raving mad.

"This ticker o' mine," concluded "Mr. Limes," as he proudly displayed a massive gold repeater, "was a present from Mr. Herbert Verney. He's still a leading actor, as most of you know. Miss Inez Lambert retired from the profession shortly after she became Mrs. Verney."

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THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD.

I.

"And they tell me, Jack, that you are married," I said, after the slight embarrassment of a meeting between old chums who had not seen each other in ten years was over and we were comfortably seated before a noble fire in his handsome library.

"Yes," he answered quietly.

I laughed long and heartily.

"The idea!" I exclaimed. "You, the cynical bachelor, the scorner of domestic bliss, the scoffer at women; you of all men—you married."

He did not reply, and I thought, correctly, that I had offended him, so presently I continued:

"Tell me how it came about?"

"A case of love at first sight," he answered.

"Nonsense," I answered. "Every man who falls in love calls it a matter of love at first sight. It is a pretty compliment that he likes to make his wife, and there is a little bit of vanity in the statement—shows what a susceptible heart he did have, after all. Nonsense! According to Gautier there is recorded in the books of the sages but one case of death from love—they have still to record an authentic case of love at first sight. Nonsense, again I say, because there is but one woman in the world with whom any man of your intelligence, experience, and ideas could fall in love at first sight, and that woman all men fell in love with. A fleeting glimpse of her, even though her face be hidden by a veil, and the man is mad for ever after. I have seen her once. I have spent eight years hunting for her all over the world. I am mad."

"Who is she?" he asked.

"I know her by no other name than The Most Beautiful Woman in the World. That is what we called her, we Bohemians, ten of us, who saw her at the opera in Paris one night eight years ago. Not a man in the house saw or heard the opera from looking at her; not a woman from jealousy of her. Verily, I believe the conductor would have requested her to withdraw had he not looked round and caught sight of her himself. Villars—you remember Villars, the cleverest artist among the youngsters when we were pretending to study art—Villars made sketches of her on his cuffs and went crazy trying, with their aid and his memory, to reproduce her face on canvas——"

"Absinthe," said Jack, laconically.

"Never more mistaken in your life," I answered; "absolute despairing love. De Lessac, the poet—he was one of us—has been trying to write a poem about her ever since. Has the inspiration, you know, but there are not words in the three languages he speaks which can interpret it. Not one of the ten of us who were together that night speak to each other from jealousy of the others. Your wife, no doubt, is most beautiful, and worthy of the love of a fellow as noble as you, but I hope for her sake, you will never see The Most Beautiful Woman in the World."

"You have not seen my wife yet," he answered, quietly.

"I have seen no woman since that day," I replied. "I have been conscious of their existence. I have conversed with them. I have danced with them. I have called on them and done my best all round to make myself as agreeable as possible to them under the circumstances, but I have never seen them. There is a vision of a queenly, golden-haired woman before my eyes. I can see her now as she sat in her box languidly waving an ostrich-feather fan, the only person in the house, saving her escort, who was paying any attention to the music."

"And her escort—who was he?"

"An ordinary-looking fellow whom none of us had ever seen before—a young man. At first we all of us feared that he was her husband, as he appeared to pay very little attention to her except to attend upon her, but of late I have come to the conclusion that he was merely a hired attendant."

"And they disappeared entirely?"

"As though from the face of the earth. They had never been seen before; they have never been seen since. I myself ransacked Paris for another sight of her. I hired detectives, I consulted with the police; it was all to no purpose. Finally I came to the conclusion that she must have been a mere visitor in Paris. I determined to seek her in the cities of Europe. I have searched them all. I can find no trace of her. I have travelled through the East. I even visited the capitals of Asia. Finally I have come to London, hopeless, but with the intention of making my search complete, at any rate."

"Perhaps she is dead."

"Don't suggest it—although I have thought of that myself. Either dead or in a convent."

"Poor fellow," he said, "I have been all through it myself; but the cases are somewhat different. I could not have escaped seeing my wife had I tried my best. In fact I didn't even have to propose to her."

"Lucky dog," I exclaimed. "I suppose the circumstances must have been more or less romantic?"

"Decidedly romantic," he answered.

"Tell me about them."

"I will," he said, "for several reasons. In the first place it will be a short history of my life since we parted and it will prepare you——"

"Prepare me for what?"

"Prepare you for a first meeting with my wife."

"Proceed," I said.

II.

"Well," he began, "you know I came to London for the purpose of settling up my father's estate. When that had been accomplished I found myself in the possession of a modest income. I had promised you, you may remember, that as soon as the estate was settled I

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would return to our delightful old student quarters in Paris. But his affairs were complicated. It had taken a long time. I had become rather used to London society, and, frankly I liked it. The fellows at my club were pleasant, and the town is certainly gay enough for any man. Of more weight than either of these considerations, however, was the fact that I was alone in the world, and had arrived at that time in a man's life when he begins to feel the domestic impulse. In other words I wanted a wife and a home. If I were to marry anyone I wanted to marry some sweet English girl, and London was the place for me to find her in.

A vision of a queenly, golden-haired woman sitting in a box.

"She was not so easily found, though. I had made up my mind that I would never marry except for actual affection. At the same time, I wanted to choose my wife from the best society, and I confess that I rather hoped she would prove to be a girl with a moderate fortune. Several years rolled away. I made the rounds of Society, but I could not find the girl. Perhaps it was because there were too many who were equally beautiful and equally rich. Perhaps it was because I could not get well enough acquainted with them. I wanted rather more knowledge of the woman I was to marry than it appears men ordinarily do. I wanted to know her character thoroughly. I wanted to make sure of happiness.

"But another thought struck me one day. Perhaps it was because I myself as a *parti* was not especially attractive. Personally I would do, perhaps. My family was an old one and a good one; I was well educated and all that; but I was not by any means well off. I had enough to support me—that was all. I brooded over the thought, and the more I brooded the more I became convinced that I was being slighted more or less by my Society acquaintances.

"I know now that I was entirely wrong, but I began to take offence at fancied slights, and in a little while began to retaliate. Then, of course, my friends became one by one a little cool, and the first thing I knew I had determined that Society was even more cold and heartless than it is ordinarily supposed to be, and I began to be angry with it.

"I thought I was unlucky. I ought to have been left a fortune sufficient to carry me in the society where I belonged. For the first time in my life I thought disagreeably of my father and his ability, and for the first time in my life I was unhappy.

"In this frame of mind I made another mistake. I concluded that if money were the object in life I might as well have none at all as a paltry sufficiency. I concluded to speculate—to gamble. If I won I would make Society come to me. If I lost—well, you would have seen me again in Paris making sketches, not for amusement, but for a living. I had no difficulty in carrying out my purpose. I soon spoke of my broker in the matter-of-fact way of a man used to speculation for years. I had all sorts of luck. Now I was on top of the wave bounding along to the shore for which I had started my little craft—now I was down in the depths with but little chance of keeping her afloat. I became nervous—I lost my head. I determined on a bold stroke. I did some things that were more than questionable; and one day I did not go down to my brokers—it was unnecessary.

"On that day I lay in bed trying hard to determine what to do—trying hard to regain my reason, my mental balance. I was sure of but one thing, which was, that I was not only ruined financially, but if I could save my honour I would consider myself lucky. I went out into the country and stayed a week at a farmhouse. Then I came back quite as unstrung as ever. I found on my return that a certain messenger, who would not state his business, had called for me regularly three times a day since my departure. I knew what that meant. It was about my business affairs. My creditors were after me, and there was no escape except an ignominious flight to the Continent.

"I tell you, old man, it was awful! I had almost determined on flight to get out of the dilemma when the messenger was announced again. At first I thought of sending him away with the information that I had not returned. Then the cowardice of the act occurred to

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me, and I had him sent up to my room. I was a trifle surprised when I saw him. He was a house-servant, and spoke with a strong French accent. He handed me a note which proved to be a polite but urgent invitation to call as soon as possible at the residence of the writer—a gentleman by the name of Du Tasi—on a matter of importance both to him and to me.

"At first I suspected that it was some matter of business connected with my unfortunate downfall. But surely I had never met nor had any dealings with a man of that name. I looked in the directory. His name was not in it. I began to be interested in the affair, and told the messenger that I would call that evening.

"Accordingly, after my dinner I strolled up to the number mentioned in the note, and found the house to be in the most fashionable neighbourhood of the West End. I was politely shown into the parlour, and before I had time to really appreciate the magnificence of the furnishings of the room was confronted by a tall, white-haired man, who was strikingly handsome. I at once attempted to determine to what nationality he belonged, but found it impossible. He had many of the graces of a Frenchman and the haughtiness of an Englishman, while his name was apparently that of a Pole. Although a man of advanced age, and somewhat weak, he bore himself erect and commandingly.

"It was a queer meeting. I looked at him wonderingly as he looked critically at me, and there was not a word spoken for several minutes by either of us. Finally, in my embarrassment I asked him what had given me the honour of an introduction to his house, and you may imagine my amazement, when he replied, in a most matter-of-fact way:

"'I wish you to marry my daughter.'

"I looked at him in such astonishment that he went on to say, in rather a haughty manner:

"'You need not consider me insane. I am fully aware that I am startling you, but I have my own reasons for presenting the matter to you in this manner.'

"'I feel,' said I, replying with a little haughtiness myself, 'that you offer me a great and'—sarcastically—'unusual honour; but I had not been intending to marry for some time yet, and really had intended, when I did choose a wife, to marry a woman whom I loved. It may have occurred to you that I have never seen your daughter, that such an extraordinary marriage would result very unhappily for both of us, that perhaps I may not be worthy of her, that, perhaps, humble as I am, she may not be——'

"'That will do,' he broke in, angrily. 'Do not say anything for which you may feel sorry in the future. I agree with you that I do not think you worthy of her, but as she loves you I intend that you shall marry her.'

"'Loves me?' I said, in astonishment.

"'Loves you,' he repeated.

"'But,' I exclaimed, 'I have never even met her!'

"'That is true,' he answered, 'and you never shall even see her until you have decided whether or not you will accept this offer of her hand in marriage.'

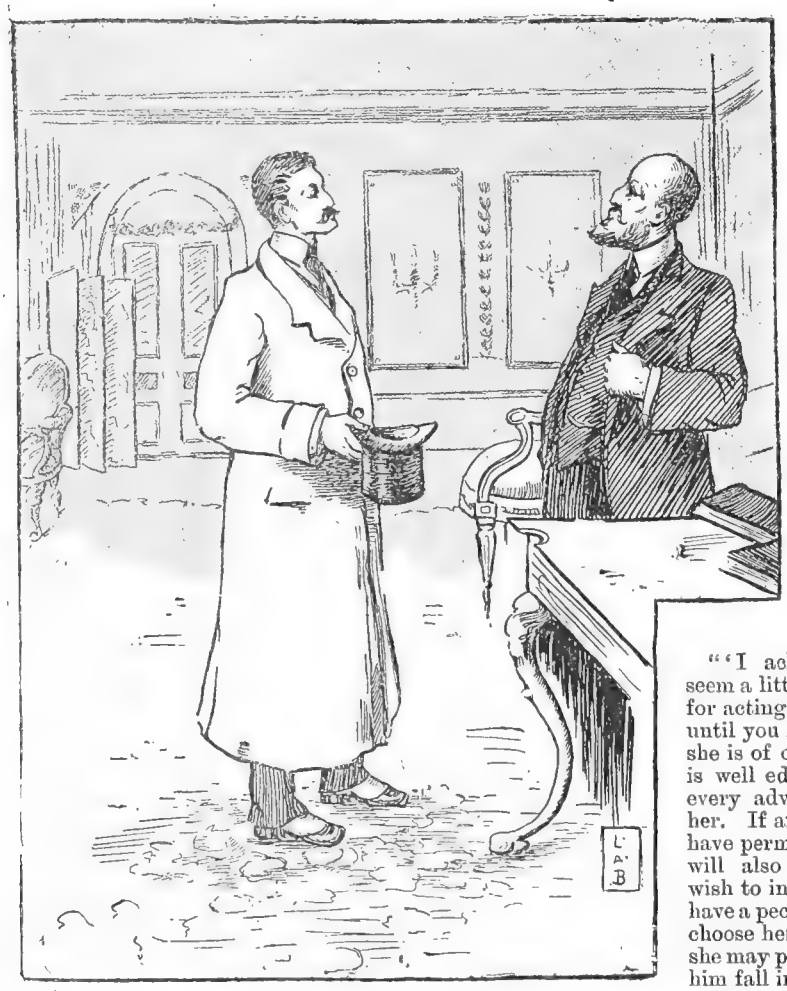
"'I decline emphatically,' I said.

"He did not appear to notice what I said, but continued:

"'I acknowledge that this proceeding may seem a little strange to you, but I have my reasons for acting as I do. While you may not see her until you have decided, I will tell you this much; she is of one of the best families in Europe; she is well educated, young, an heiress, and has had every advantage that immense wealth can give her. If any of these things are not true you will have permission to break the engagement. You will also be furnished every opportunity you wish to inquire into them. I will also say that I have a peculiar reason for wishing her husband to choose her before he sees her—in other words, that she may pick out the man whom she loves, and let him fall in love with her afterwards if he can——'

"'Ah, if he can,' I echoed. 'Suppose she is not beautiful.'

"'That is precisely the point I wish to keep



"I wish you to marry my daughter."

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from you. If she loves her husband she will be easily governed by him, and she will be happy——'

"'While if he loves her——'

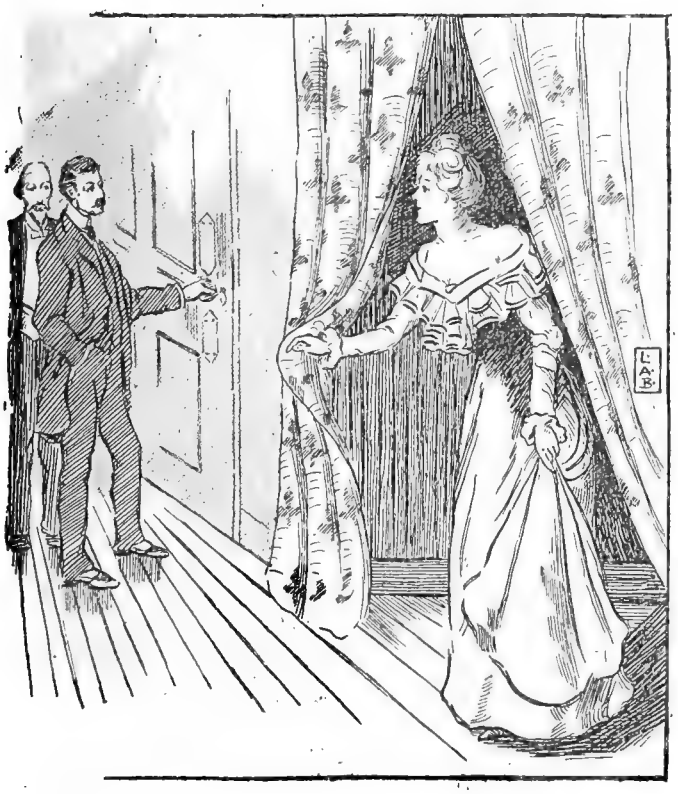
"'And she knows it, she may not.'

"'But suppose the husband she chooses in such a remarkable manner falls in love with her after the marriage?'

"'She need not know it.'

"'Frankly,' I said, 'I believe you are a trifle insane.'

"'No,' he answered, 'not in the least. I merely know a great deal about human nature. I know what heredity



She was standing there.

and circumstance did when they united in my daughter and I know what is best for her. I wish her to be happy and——'

"'And you are willing to sacrifice the happiness of the man she loves in order to make her happy.'

"'The man who marries my daughter, sir,' he answered, will be very happy.'

"'That may be,' I said, 'but I decline to be a party to any experiment in marriage.'

"Again he did not seem to notice what I had said.

"'The offer of her hand, her choice of you is a great compliment. I have taken her round the world. She has seen men of every description, and has known the history of the life of every man in whom she took any interest. Although none of them talked with her, thought of her, she has known them as thoroughly as it is possible for detective skill to find out the actual character of a man. She knows every step you have taken, everything you have done for the past three months, when I may add, we arrived in London.'

"I blushed hotly. Did she know—did he know—the verge of ruin on which I was standing? Was it possible that any young girl could love a man who was so hopelessly in the depths of despair as I? I tried to hide my embarrassment by asking:

"'Where, if you please, did she ever see me?'

"'In many places and at many times,' he answered.

"'I do not see,' I laughed in rather a shamefaced way, 'what she can see to love in me.'

"'Love is decidedly the strangest thing in the world,' he answered.

"'Does she know that I am—that I am penniless!' I asked.

"'She does.'

"'Does she know that I am worse than penniless—that I am almost dishonoured?' I cried.

"'But you are not dishonoured,' he answered, 'although I must confess that you have been as imprudent as most young men are at some time or other in their lives.'

"'Ah! she does not know it all then?' I said.

"'More than you do,' he answered.

"'What do you mean?'

"'I mean that your debts have all been paid—that you have money in the bank—that your credit has been restored. By the way'—here he put his hand in his pocket—'here are some papers, cancelled notes and a cheque that was dishonoured. They belong to you. Take them.'

"I was—well, you may imagine the condition of my mind. I began to think that I had suddenly become insane. I could not speak. He saw my condition, and kindly taking me by the arm led me to the door.

"'Go back to your club and think it over. Come to-morrow and tell me your answer. There is one thing, by the way, that you need not fear. I am playing no trick upon you. If you do not find that I have told you the truth in every particular you need not consider yourself under obligation to marry her.'

III.

"I WENT back to my club, and I tried to think it over. But what can a man think under such circumstances as those?

"It all seemed like a sixteenth century romance. Why did he want me to marry a woman I had never seen? I repeated the question a thousand times as I paced back and forth in my room.

"Was she repulsive in appearance? Was she—well, there were a thousand things that suggested themselves to me. At last, however, I came to my senses. Of course, I would not marry her. The proposition was absurd. Why should I go blindfolded into a marriage? Why should I permit myself to be bought with a few cancelled notes? I would make him take them back. I would see that he got back his money. And I would tell him again that I would not consider such a proposition.

"This conclusion brought back my equanimity, and I went to bed and slept soundly. The next morning I

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called on him again. He greeted me with a smile, and for some time evaded the subject of the marriage. He gave me time to appreciate the beauty of the room, the taste with which the furniture was arranged, the elegance of the whole, and last, to notice that a portrait —a life-size portrait—was turned towards the wall, a fact that I had indistinctly noticed the day before. It was a picture of his daughter, of course. I would have given ten years of my life to have had a glimpse of it. I began wondering if, after all, she were not beautiful. I began picturing her to myself. Surely they would not put in that room a portrait of a homely girl. I began to feel just a little bit romantic. I thought I heard the rustle of a dress behind a curtain at the end of the room. I was sure I heard it. Beyond a doubt she was there. She who—well, it was hard to believe—but she who had fallen in love with me before I had ever spoken a word to her or thought a word of her. She who wanted to dower me with wealth and position, and perhaps beauty. It was the most tantalising situation imaginable. What was it to her I began to wonder? If she actually loved me what were her feelings as she stood behind that *portière* waiting for me to say yes or no? Would her heart throb with pleasure if I said yes? Would she go to her room and weep if I said no? Surely I had the better of the position, because so far as the heart was concerned, at least it was a matter of indifference to me. All these things flitted through my mind as I tried to carry on the conversation with her handsome father.

"Finally, however, I concluded that it were better to bring the thing to a conclusion at once.

"I arose. He understood merely from the action that I had concluded to decline, and he turned and looked away, almost sadly, I thought, and I fancied I heard him sigh. Again, too, I heard the rustle of the dress.

"'I feel deeply honoured,' I began, 'by your remarkable offer. I am truly grateful for your generosity in giving me financial assistance, but I can——'

"There had been no other sound than that of my own voice, but I knew, I was conscious of the fact that the *portière* at the end of the room had been drawn aside, and I knew that she was standing there revealed. I looked quickly in her direction. Well—I don't know how to describe it. I don't know how to describe her beauty. I don't know how to describe the sensation that came over me, except that it was love—love at first sight. She was standing there with her beautiful eyes beseeching me to say yes. I could read it just as plainly as though she had spoken the prayer in words. Her arms were outstretched to me, and she was blushing. I tell you, it was irresistible. I turned to her father and said:

"'I accept.'"

Here Jack ended his story.

"What was her father's reason for acting as he did?" I asked him.

"A very sensible one," he replied. "She was so rich and so beautiful that any man would have married her, and any man would have pretended love for her in order to marry her."

"But I thought he did not want her husband to love her?"

"Not at all. He did not want her husband to fall in love with her, or to say he was in love with her until after he had practically become possessed of her fortune and her hand. In other words, he wanted honest love on both sides, and he got it."

"When shall I see her?"

"Now. I can always tell the rustle of her dress after that experience, and I hear it in the next room. She is going into the conservatory to cut some flowers. We will take a look at her before she sees us. Come."

We tip-toed cautiously into the next room. A door from it opened into the conservatory. Standing in that doorway we saw her as she stooped slightly over a rose almost as beautiful as herself.

"Well old man," said Jack, "What do you think? Is she as beautiful as The Most Beautiful Woman in the World?"

Fortunately he did not see me tremble. I made a supreme effort, and said calmly:

"Quite as beautiful."

But I did not tell him that she was indeed the woman —The Most Beautiful Woman in the World.

The Romance of Elizabeth.

By RAWSON REED.

Her name, Elizabeth Friedheim, was German. Her blue eyes and flaxen hair were German. But there was nothing of the Teutonic repose in her manner, and her way of whistling at her work and executing little dance steps across the kitchen when she thought Mrs. Pratt was not looking, did not indicate Teutonic solidity of character.

Mrs. Pratt was afraid at first that she would not do by any means, particularly when, on the second evening of Elizabeth's engagement, she found a young man in the kitchen, whose cleanliness and almost shininess left no doubt of his character of "beau."

Still, Elizabeth seemed to be conducting herself with the utmost propriety, the young man left early, so Mrs. Pratt said nothing at the time.

The next day, however, she thought she would mention it, and she said, in a mild, motherly sort of way, that she did not want the young man there too often—not oftener than once a week at any rate.

Elizabeth laughed, and said that she did not want him too often, either, and she thought that once a week was too often, so Mrs. Pratt went away feeling satisfied.

So far as the work was concerned she certainly had nothing to complain of. Of course the girl was a new broom, but the way she took hold of things, the quickness and thoroughness with which they were done, and the neatness and order that seemed to descend upon the flat were exceptional.

Mrs. Pratt had been suffering from a long series of transient incompetents, who had lined her brow with

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care and turned three hairs nearly grey. She still felt apprehensive, though, and her foreboding was increased when in the course of the afternoon she found Elizabeth out on the back porch chatting pleasantly with the caretaker, who appeared to be enjoying the conversation immensely.

That evening Mrs. Pratt heard a sound of laughter proceeding from the kitchen, and, having some natural feminine curiosity, she went out to see what was happening.

It was another clean and shiny young man sitting on the kitchen table and swinging his heels, while Elizabeth swung hers from a seat on the table and ate chocolates out of a paper bag.

Mrs. Pratt went back into the parlour in a frame of mind, and told Mr. Pratt that he would have to call at the registry-office the next morning and see if he couldn't find another girl.

"Why, what's the trouble, now?" asked Pratt.

"Well, she's got the second one in there now; one isn't enough for her and I simply will not have that sort of thing going on every night, anyway. She can't carry on with young men and give proper attention to her work, and, besides, it isn't proper for a young girl. I spoke to her about it yesterday, and that seems to be all the good it did."

"Now, look here," said Pratt, "perhaps it isn't the girl's fault at all. To look at her I should say that it wasn't; you know how that is yourself."

"I don't know anything of the kind."

"Perhaps you don't. I know it was a cold night when I first went to see you and didn't find anyone there, and I know that you told me that you couldn't help it, so I'm making the same allowance for the girl."

Mrs. Pratt said he was talking nonsense, and he didn't make allowances at all, and it wasn't anything of the kind, anyway; but she was mollified to a certain extent, and said she would take her husband's advice and wait a little while before she did anything rash.

She was glad that she had come to that decision the next morning, for the breakfast was punctual and everything was so nicely cooked that even Pratt expressed his satisfaction, and as a general thing Pratt is hard to satisfy at breakfast time.

Then the subsequent sweeping, dusting, washing and scouring were all as well done, as it is possible to do those things, and through it all Elizabeth whistled like a nightingale.

It was that way from that time forth. Work was done to perfection, and the young men came with regularity, but Elizabeth never let them interfere with her domestic duties.

There was one young man for nearly every night in the week, and it seemed that those whose turn fell on the off nights when the Pratts had company were apparently accorded the privilege of the Sunday afternoon walk.

How the girl managed them so well Mrs. Pratt confessed was a mystery to her, and Pratt said that if it was a mystery to her it must be a mystery indeed.

Then subsequent benefits were derived from the pretty little maid's knack of managing.

If anything that the groceryman or the milkman brought to the house was not what Elizabeth considered it should be, that groceryman or milkman or other man took it back with absolute enthusiasm and was forthcoming with the proper article within the shortest possible space of time. It was simply marvellous.

Sometimes Mrs. Pratt felt it her duty to remonstrate with the girl concerning her coquetry, but Elizabeth only laughed.

She was always laughing.

"It does them good," she said. "If they did not like it they would not come any more, so it is good for them and good for me."

When Mrs. Pratt told her husband about this he was seriously concerned.

"I should have thought you would have known better than that," he said. "Just as long as she keeps the lot going we are all right. If she had only one I should be frightened. Let her alone; she's all right. And I think, by the way, that we might manage to put another ten shillings a month on her wages."

That, Mrs. Pratt said, was just the way you might expect a man to look at such things—just as long as he was comfortable he was willing to wink at iniquity. Nevertheless the lady did begin to think she might have said too much and the prospect of Elizabeth settling to a "one and only," marrying and leaving them, was not pleasant. So she felt impelled to express to her domestic the hope that she would not let one of those young men run away with her.

"You need not be afraid," laughed Elizabeth. "Now, I have a good time, and if I marry—well, I have seen some people who have married and I am not in a hurry. I have my good time first, anyway."

Sometimes one of Elizabeth's beaux dropped off, either discouraged or dismissed, but there was always another to take his place, and it afforded the Pratts quite a little amusement to note the changes.

One evening Mrs. Pratt went into the kitchen and found a newcomer, who seemed to be of a different stamp from the others—not so clean or neat, and older, but a good-looking fellow enough, and of a breadth and stature that seemed to make the kitchen shrink. He rose to his feet at the lady's entrance and made an awkward bow, and Mrs. Pratt noticed for the first time that Elizabeth blushed.

For two or three weeks this giant called at his appointed time; then he came twice in one week. The second time this happened the Pratts heard voices raised in anger—male voices—and then the sound of a scuffle and a scream from Elizabeth.

Pratt jumped up and ran into the kitchen just as the outer door slammed, and found Elizabeth with the bloom fled from her face confronting her latest admirer, who stood with his back to the door scowling at her.

"What does this mean?" demanded Pratt.

Elizabeth began to cry and the giant stood sullen and silent.

"Whatever it is," continued Pratt, "I won't have it. Get out of this house and don't let me find you here again. I don't want to have any trouble with you, but I tell you to get out."

For an instant the big man hesitated; then he turned, and with a parting scowl at the girl opened the door and disappeared.

Pratt attempted to question Elizabeth, but she would do nothing but cry, and at last he gave it up and went back and told his wife that he thought Elizabeth's management had failed for once, and two had called at the same time with the result of the survival of the fittest.

It is probable that he was right.

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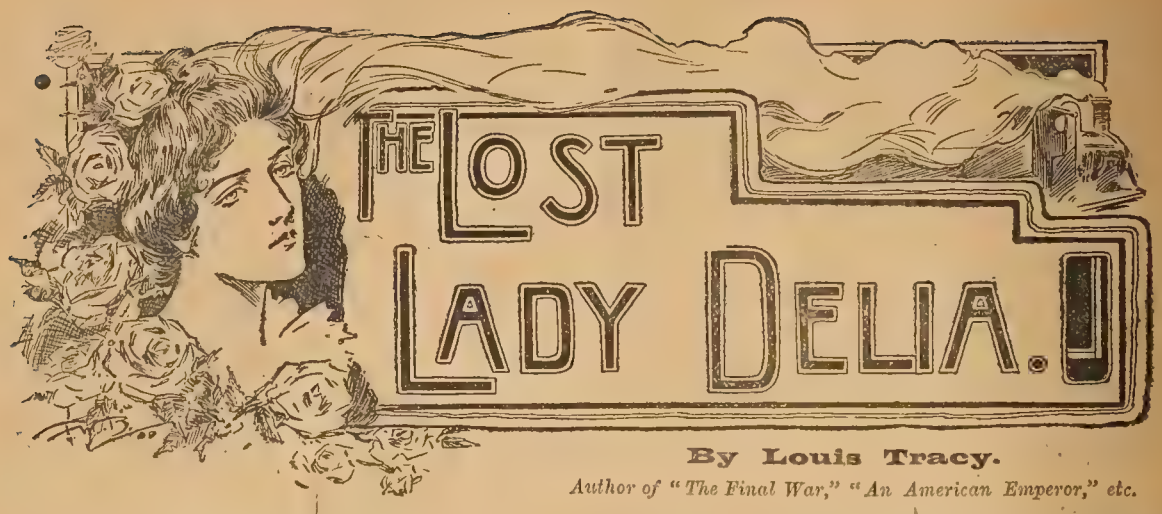

By Louis Tracy.

Author of "The Final War," "An American Emperor," etc.

CHAPTER XXIII. (*continued*).

"Pooh! The mania of an hysterical woman!"

"Possibly!"

"Why 'possibly'? Do you for a moment believe the monstrous insinuation?"

"No, not in that sense. But her brother was about to make some revelation regarding a third person when she appealed to him not to speak. What would have happened finally I do not know. At that critical moment my servant announced your arrival."

"But what can Mrs. Hilmer have to conceal? She and her brother have been lost from Society since long before my marriage. Neither of them has, to my knowledge, ever set eyes on my wife during the last seven years."

"Yet Mrs. Hilmer *must* have had some powerful motive in acting as she did."

"Is it not more likely that she had a bad attack of nerves?"

"A woman who merely yields to nervous prostration behaves foolishly. This woman gave way to emotion, it is true, but it was strength, not weakness, that sustained her."

"What do you mean?"

"There is but one force that sustains in such a crisis—the power of love. Mrs. Hilmer was not flying from consequences. She met them half-way in the spirit of a martyr."

"'Pon my honour, Brett, I am beginning to think that this wretched business is affecting your usually clear brain. You are accepting fancies as facts."

"Maybe. I confess to feeling unequal to form a logical conclusion to-night."

"Why not abandon the whole muddle to time? There is no solution of a difficulty like the almanac. Let us both go off somewhere."

"What, and leave Mrs. Hilmer to die of sheer pain of mind? To let this unfortunate fellow, Mensmore, suffer no one knows what consequences from the events of to-day? It is out of the question."

"Very well, I leave you to it. Everyone seems to forget that it is I who suffer most." The baronet stood up and dejectedly gazed into the fire.

"I, at least, can feel for you, Lyle," said Brett sympathetically, "but you must admit that things cannot be allowed to remain in their present whirlpool."

"So be it. Let them go on to their bitter end. If my wife was tired of my society she might at least have got rid of me in an easier manner."

With this trite reflection Sir Charles quitted his friend's house.

Brett sat for a long time motionless. Then, as his mind became calmer, he lit a cigar, took out the doubly mysterious letter, and examined it in every possible way, critically and microscopically.

There could be no doubt that it was a genuine production. The condition of the ink bore out the correctness of the date, and the fact that the note-paper and envelope were not of Continental style was not very material.

It did not appear to have been inclosed in another envelope, as the writer implied, for the purpose of being reposted in London. Rather did the slightly frayed edges of the cover give rise to the assumption that it had been carried in someone's pocket before postage. But this theory was vague and undemonstrable.

The handwriting was Lady Delia's; the style, allowing for the strange conditions under which it was written, was hers; yet Brett did not believe in it.

Nothing could shake his faith in the one solid, concrete certainty that stood out from a maze of contradictions and mystery—Lady Delia Lyle was dead, and buried in a pauper's grave at Putney.

At last, wearied with thought and unsatisfactory theorising, he went to bed; but Smith sat up late to regale his partner with the full, true, and particular narrative of the "lydy a-cryin' on her knees, and the strange gent lookin' as though he would like to murder Mr. Winter."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HANDWRITING.

LIKE most men, Reggie took a different view of events in the morning to that which he entertained overnight.

Yesterday, the surprises of the hour were concrete embodiments, each distinct and emphatic. To-day they were merged in the general mass of contradictory details that made up this most bewildering inquiry.

That matters could not be allowed to rest in their present state was clear; that they would, in the natural course of things, reveal themselves more definitely, even if unaided, was also patent.

Mrs. Hilmer's partial admissions, her brother's evident knowledge of some salient features of the puzzle, that utterly strange letter in the admitted handwriting of Lady Delia herself, and bearing the prosaic testimony of dates stamped by the Post-office—these sensational elements, when brought into juxtaposition, could not help reacting into additional phases.

Long experience in criminal investigation told Brett that, under certain circumstances, the best course of all was one of inaction.

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On the basis of the accepted truism in the affairs of many people that "letters left unanswered answer themselves," the barrister knew that there must be an outcome from the queer medley of occurrences at his residence on the Monday evening.

Reviewing the history of the past three months several oddities stood out from the general jumble.

In the first place he wondered why he had failed to deduce any pertinent fact from the manner in which Mrs. Hilmer's dining-room was furnished on the occasion of his first visit to Raleigh Mansions.

He distinctly remembered noting his reception in an unusual room littered with unusual articles, when the luxurious and well-appointed suite of apartments was considered as a whole. It was suggested to him at the time that the drawing-room, which he saw during his second visit, was dismantled earlier, but he did not connect this trivial incident with the feature in Mensmore's flat that he noted immediately—namely, the discrepancies between the arrangement of his sitting-room and all other chambers in the place.

These things were immaterial now, but he indexed them as a guide for future use.

Lady Delia's motive for that secret visit to Raleigh Mansions—that was the key of the mystery. But how to discover it? Who was her confidant? To whom could he turn for possible enlightenment? It was useless to broach the matter again to Sir Charles Lyle. The baronet and his wife had been friends sharing the same *ménage* rather than husband and wife. Lady Delia's relatives had already been appealed to in vain. They knew nothing of the slightest value in this search for truth.

In this train of thought the name of Jane Harding cropped up. She was the personal maid of the deceased lady. She had sharp eyes and quick wits. Her queer antics shortly after the inquest were not forgotten. Here at least was a possibility of light if the girl would but speak.

If she refused what could be her motive?

Anyhow it was worth while to make a fresh effort.

Early in the afternoon Brett called at the stage-door of the Jollity Theatre.

"Is Miss Marie le Marchant still employed here?" he asked the attendant.

"I dunno," was the careless answer.

"Well, think hard," said the barrister, laying a half-crown on the battered blotting-pad which is an indispensable part of the furniture in the letter bureau at a theatre.

"Yes, sir, I believe she is, but she has been away on a week's leave."

"Indeed. Has she returned?"

"I was off last night, sir, but if you will pardon me a moment I'll inquire from the man who took my place."

The stage-doorkeeper disappeared into the dark interior, to return quickly with the information that Miss Le Marchant had appeared as usual on the Monday night.

"She was away most part of last week, sir," added the man, "and I believe it wasn't on a holiday, as she was a-sort of flurried about it as if someone was ill."

"Thank you. Do you know where she lives?"

A momentary hesitation was soon softened by another half-crown.

"It's against the rules, sir. If you were to find yourself near Jubilee-buildings, Bloomsbury, you would not be far out."

This information was sound. Miss Marie le Marchant's name was painted outside a second-floor flat.

Brett knocked, and the door was opened by an elderly woman whom he had no difficulty in recognising.

"Is your daughter in, Mrs. Harding?" he said.

For a moment she could not speak for surprise.

(*Continued on page* 314.)

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"Well, I never," she cried, "but London is a funny place. Do you know me, sir?"

"Anyone would recognise you from your daughter, if they did not take you for her elder sister," he said. Brett's smile was irresistible.

"My daughter is not in just now, sir," replied Mrs. Harding, "but I expect her in to tea almost immediately."

"Then may I come in and await her arrival?"

"Certainly, sir."

Once inside the flat, Brett was struck by the pretentious but fairly comfortable nature of its appointments, the ex-lady's maid's legacy must have been a nice one to enable her to live in such style, as the poor pittance of a coryphée would barely pay for the rent and taxes. Moreover, the presence of her mother in the establishment was a distinct factor in her favour.

Mrs. Harding had brought the visitor to the tiny sitting-room. She seated herself near the window and resumed some sewing.

"Have you been long in town, Mrs. Harding?" said Brett, by way of being civil.

"In London, do you mean, sir? About two months. Ever since my daughter got along so well in her new profession. She's a good girl, is my daughter."

"Miss Harding is doing well on the stage, then?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Why, she's been earning £6 a week, and last week she was sent for for a special engagement, which paid her so well that she's going to buy me a new dress out of the money."

"Really," said Brett, "you ought to be proud of her."

"I am," said the admiring mother. "I only wish her brother who went off and 'listed for a sojer had turned out half as well."

Mrs. Harding nodded towards a photograph of a cavalry soldier in uniform on the mantelshelf, and Brett rose to examine it, inwardly marvelling at the intelligence he had just received. Was it reasonable that the girl could be the recipient of a legacy without the knowledge of her mother? In any case, why did she conceal the real nature of her earnings, as the story about £6 a week was a myth.

Near to the portrait of the gallant hussar was a large plaque presentment of Miss Marie herself, in all the glory of tights, wig, and make-up. Across it was written in the best theatrical style:

"Ever yours sincerely, Marie le Marchant." And no sooner had Brett caught sight of the words than he almost cried out in voluntary astonishment.

The handwriting was identical with that of Lady Lyle.

Gulping down his amazement, Brett devoured the signature with his eyes.

The resemblance was truly remarkable. What on earth could be the explanation of this phenomenon?

"Your daughter is a remarkably nice writer, Mrs. Harding," he said, turning the photograph towards her.

"Yes," said the complacent mother, "she taught herself when—before she went on the stage. She was always a clever girl, and when she grew up she improved herself. I wasn't able to afford her much schooling when she was young."

"I have seldom seen a nicer hand," went on Reggie. "Have you any other specimens of her writing convenient? I should like to see them if they are not private."

The smooth surface of the photograph might perhaps lend a deceptive fluency to the pen. He wanted to make quite sure that he was not mistaken.

"Oh, yes. She's just copying out the part of 'Ophelia' in *Hamlet*. And she acts it beautiful."

Mrs. Harding handed over a large MSS. book, and there, written on the first page, was the name of the luckless woman whose fatal passion had moved millions to tears.

The barrister seized at once on the weird coincidence that lent similitude to the two names.

The last four letters of "Ophelia" were so precisely like the same letters in the signature of Lady Delia Lyle that, without other evidence, he would have sworn, to the best of his belief, that the deceased lady herself wrote the word.

He admired Miss Marie le Marchant for her efforts in the direction of culture, but he was determined, once and for all, to get from her some explanation of her actions.

The rattle of a key in the outer door caused him to throw aside the coveted "part," and the young lady herself entered. A few weeks of stage experience had given her a more stylish appearance. There was a "professional" touch in the arrangement of her hat and the droop of her skirt.

She knew him instantly, and listened with evident anger to her mother's explanation that "this gentleman has just called to see you, dear."

"All right, mother," she cried. "I see it is Mr. Brett. Will you get tea ready whilst I talk with him? I shall be ready in two minutes." This with a defiant look at Reggie.

When Mrs. Harding had left the room her daughter said in the crisp accents of ill-temper:

"What do you want with me, now?"

"I want to ask you why you dared to write a letter to Sir Charles Lyle in the name of your dead mistress?"

The answer was so direct, the tone so menacing, its assumption of absolute and unquestioned knowledge so complete that for a moment Marie le Marchant's assurance failed her.

She stood like one petrified, with eyes dilated and breast heaving. At last she managed to ejaculate:

"I—I—why do you ask me that question?"

"Because I must have the truth from you this time. You are playing a very dangerous game."

That he was right he was now sure beyond doubt. It was impossible for the girl to deny it with those piercing eyes fixed upon her, and seeming to read the secrets of her heart.

Yet she was plucky enough. Although she was confused and on the point of bursting into tears, she snapped viciously:

"I will tell you nothing. Go away."

"You are obstinate, I know," said Brett, "but I must warn you that you are juggling with edged tools. You should not imagine that you can trifle with murder. What is your motive for deliberately trying to conceal Lady Delia's death? If you do not answer me you may be asked the question in a court of law."

"You have no right to come here annoying me," she retorted.

"I am not here to annoy you. I come, rather as a friend to appeal to you not to incur the grave risk of keeping from the authorities information which they ought to possess."

"What information?"

"The reasons which led you to leave Sir Charles Lyle's house so suddenly, the source whence you obtain your money, paid to you, doubtless, to secure your silence, the motive which impelled you to use your ability to imitate Lady Delia's handwriting in order to propagate the false news that she is alive. This is the information needed, and your wilful refusal to give it constitutes a grave indictment."

"I don't care *that* for you, Mr. Brett," replied the girl, her face set now in a scarlet temper, whilst she snapped her fingers to emphasize her words. "You can do and say what you like, I will tell you nothing."

"You cannot deny you wrote that letter to Sir Charles Lyle last Saturday?"

"I am waiting for my tea, Mr. Brett. Sorry I can't ask you to join me."

"Your flippancy will not avail you. See, here is the letter itself—your own production—written on paper of which you have a quantity in this very room."

The shot was a bold one, and it very nearly hit the mark.

(*Continued on page* 316.)

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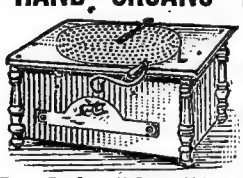

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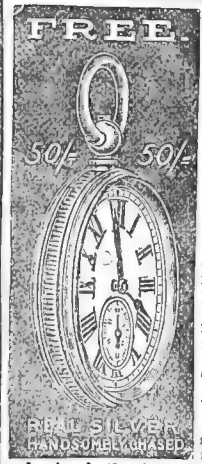

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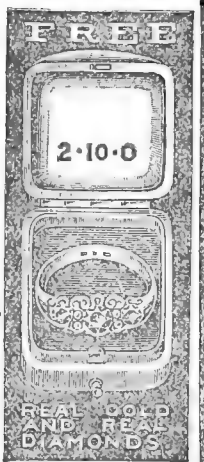

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She was staggered, almost subdued by this melodramatic production of the original, and his clever guess at the existence of similar notepaper in the house.

But her dogged temperament saved her. Jane Harding was British, notwithstanding her penchant for a French-sounding name, and she would have died sooner than beat a retreat.

"I will thank you to leave me alone, Mr. Brett," she said.

There was nothing for it but to retire as gracefully as possible, but the barrister was more than satisfied with his visit. He had now established beyond a shadow of doubt that for some reason which he could not fathom the ex-lady's maid not only knew of her mistress' death but wished to conceal it.

This desire, too, had the essential feature of every other branch of the inquiry; it grew to maturity long after the day when Lady Delia was actually killed. What did it all mean?

From Bloomsbury he went west to Portman Square, and found Sir Charles on the point of going for a drive in the Park.

He briefly told him his discovery.

The baronet at first was sceptical. "Do you mean to say, Brett," he cried fretfully, "that I do not know my wife's writing when I see it?"

"You may think you do, but when another person can imitate it exactly, of course, you may be deceived. Besides, if this girl, as is probible, was helped in her work by your wife, what is more likely than that Jane Harding should seek to copy that which she would consider the ideal of excellence. Don't harbour any delusions in the matter, Lyle. The letter you received on Monday morning was written by Jane Harding. I am sure of that from her manner no less than from the accidental resemblance of the two styles of handwriting. What I could not find out was her motive for the deceit."

"It is a queer business altogether," said Sir Charles, wearily; "I wish it were ended."

CHAPTER XXV.

Miss Phyllis Browne Intervenes.

Brett was quite positive in his belief that Jane Harding was the paid agent of some person who wished to conceal the facts concerning Lady Delia's death.

Her unexpected appearance in the field at this late hour, no less than the bold *rôle* she adopted, proved this to his satisfaction. But in England there was no torture-chamber to which she could be led and gradually dismembered until she confessed the truth.

So long as she adhered to the policy of pert denial she was quite safe. The law could not touch her, for the chief witness against her, Sir Charles Lyle, was obviously more than half inclined to admit the genuineness of the letter, even in opposition to the superior judgment of his friend.

Yet it was a matter which Brett considered ought to be made known to the police, so he sent for Mr. Winter and told him of the strange result of his interview with Miss Marie le Marchant.

"Dash everything!" cried the detective when he heard the news. "I made a note some time ago that that girl ought to be watched, but I clean forgot all about it."

"Remember," said Brett, "that my discovery was the result of pure accident. My object in visiting her was to endeavour to induce her confidence with regard to Lady Delia's former life and habits. Indeed, I handled the business very badly."

"I don't see that, sir. You got hold of a very remarkable fact, and thus prevented the success of a bold move by someone which, in my case, at any rate, nearly choked me off the inquiry."

"True. So far chance favoured me. But I ought to have been content with the assumption. There was no need to frighten her by pressing it home."

"Oh, from that point of view"—began the detective.

But Brett was merely thinking aloud—rough-shaping his ideas as they grouped themselves in his brain.

"Perhaps I am wrong there too," he went on. "If this girl is working to instructions she would have refused to help me in any way, and she already knows that I am on the trail. There is one highly satisfactory feature in the Jane Harding adventure, Mr. Winter."

"And what is that?"

"The person, or persons, responsible for Lady Delia's death know that the matter has not been dropped. They are inclined to think that the circle is narrowing. In some of our casts, Mr. Winter, we must have come so unpleasantly close to them that they deemed it advisable to throw us off the scent by a bold effort."

"No doubt you are right, sir, but I wish to goodness I knew when we were 'warm,' as I am getting tired of the business. Every new development deepens the mystery."

Mr. Winter's face was as downcast as his words.

"Surely not! The more pieces of the puzzle we have to handle the less difficult should be the final task of putting them together."

"Not when every piece is a fresh puzzle in itself."

"Why, what has disconcerted you to-day?"

"Mrs. Hilmer."

"What of her?"

"I've had another talk with the maid—her companion, you know—a girl named Dobson. It struck me that it was advisable to know more about Mrs. Hilmer than we do at present."

Brett made no comment, but he could not help the reflection that Pyne, the stranger from Wyoming, had entertained the same view.

"Well," continued the detective, "I went about the affair as quietly as possible, but the maid, though willing could not tell me much. Mrs. Hilmer, she thinks, married very young, and was badly treated by her husband. Finally, there was a rumpus, and she went on the stage, whilst Hilmer drank himself to death. He died about a year ago, but they had been separated nearly five years. He was fairly well-to-do, but he squandered all his money in dissipation, and never gave her a cent. Three years last Michaelmas she set up her present establishment at Raleigh Mansions, and there she has been ever since."

"Then where does the money come from? It must cost her at least £2,000 a year to live."

"That's just what the maid can't tell me. Her mistress led a very secluded life, and was never what you could call fast, though a very pretty woman. During this time she had only one visitor—a gentleman."

"Ah!"

"It sounds promising, but it ends in smoke, so far as I can see."

"Why?"

"This gentleman was a Colonel Montgomery—an old friend—though he wasn't much turned thirty, the maid says. He interested himself a lot in Mrs. Hilmer's affairs, looked after some investments for her, and was on very good terms with her, and nobody could whisper a word against the character of either of them. He was never there except in the afternoon, and on very rare occasions took Mrs. Hilmer, whose maid always accompanied them, to Epping Forest, or up the river, or on some such short journey."

"Go on!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but the chase is over. He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. The maid doesn't know how, or when exactly but one day she found her mistress crying, and when she asked her what was the matter Mrs. Hilmer said, 'I've lost

(*Continued on page 318.*)

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my only friend." The maid said, "Surely not Colonel Montgomery, madam?' and she replied 'Yes.' She quite took on about it."

"Had the maid no idea as to the date of this interesting occurrence?"

"Only a vague one. Sometime in the autumn or before Christmas. By Jove, yes; it escaped me at the time, but she said that soon after the colonel's death another gentleman called and took her mistress out to dinner. I was so busy thinking about the colonel that I slipped the significance of that statement. It must have been you, Mr. Brett."

"So it seems." The barrister's active brain was already assimilating this new information. If a woman like Mrs. Hilmer had lost a dear and valuable friend—one who practically formed the horizon of her life—she would certainly have worn mourning for him. It was a singular coincidence that Mrs. Hilmer should have "lost" Colonel Montgomery about the same time that Lady Delia disappeared. The detective and the maid both had drawn a false inference from Mrs. Hilmer's words.

"We must find Colonel Montgomery," he said, after a slight pause.

"Find him!"

"Yes."

"I hope neither of us is going his way for some time to come, Mr. Brett," laughed the policeman.

"Winter, I shall never cure you from jumping at conclusions. Upon your present evidence Colonel Montgomery is no more dead than you are."

"But the maid said——"

"I don't care if fifty maids said. There are many more ways of 'losing' a friend than by death. Pass me the Army List, on that bookshelf behind you there."

A brief reference to the index, and Brett said:

"I thought so. There is no *Colonel* Montgomery. There are several captains and lieutenants, and a Major-General who has commanded a small island in the Pacific for the last five years, but not a single colonel. Winter, you have blundered into eminence in your profession."

"I'm glad to hear it, even as you put it, Mr. Brett. But I don't see——"

"I know you don't. If you did, a popular novelist would write your life and style you the English Lecocq. Mrs. Hilmer 'lost' the gallant colonel at the same time that the world 'lost' Lady Delia. Find the first, and I am much mistaken if we do not learn all about the second."

"Now I wonder if you are right."

The detective's eyes sparkled with animation. It was the first real clue he had hit upon, and Brett's method of complimenting him on the fact did not disconcert him.

"Of course I'm right. You have done so well with the maid that I leave her in your hands. Try the coachman and the cook. But keep me informed of your progress."

Winter rushed off elated. So persistent was he in striving to elucidate this new problem that he paid no heed for some days to the side-light furnished by Jane Harding and her exceedingly curious powers as a letter-writer.

Brett purposely left the inquiry to the policeman. He realised intuitively that the disappearance of Lady Delia would soon be explained, but he shrank from subjecting Mrs. Hilmer to the ordeal of further questioning.

His abstinence was rewarded later in the week, for Mensmore came to see him.

The young man wore an expression of settled melancholy which surprised the barrister greatly.

"Have you prevailed on your sister to take us into her confidence?" said Brett, when Mensmore was ensconced in a chair in his cosy sitting-room.

"No. She is more fixed than ever in her resolve to take the whole blame on herself."

"Surely this mistaken idea can be shaken?"

"I fear not."

"And you share it yourself?"

"I do. Bear with us, Brett. This is a terrible business. It has broken me up utterly."

"Nonsense. You are in no way concerned save to shield your sister, and no one credits her wild statements regarding complicity in this crime."

"Look here, Brett, I have come to ask you if this investigation cannot be allowed to rest. It means a lot of misery that you cannot foretell or prevent. Knowing what I do I cannot believe Lady Delia was murdered."

"Knowing what I do I can accept no other conclusion. A worthy and estimable lady leaves her home suddenly, without the slightest imaginary cause, and she is found in the Thames with a piece of iron driven into her brain whilst the medical evidence is clear that death was not due to drowning. What other inference can be drawn than that she was foully done to death?"

"Heaven help me, I cannot tell. Yet I appeal to you to let matters rest where they are if it is possible."

"It is not possible. I cannot control the police. I am merely a private agent acting on my own responsibility and on behalf of Lady Delia's relatives."

"Don't misunderstand me, Brett. I am not asking this thing on account of my sister or myself."

"On account of whom, then?"

Mensmore did not answer for a moment. He looked mournfully into the fire for inspiration.

"Perhaps I had better tell you," he said, "that I have broken off my engagement with Miss Browne."

Brett jumped up from his chair. "What the dickens do you mean?" he cried.

"Exactly what I have said. When we met on Monday night, I could not mention that Sir William and Lady Browne and their daughter travelled back to England with us. On Tuesday I saw Phyllis. In view of the shadow thrown on us by this frightful charge I thought it my duty to release her from any ties to me. If my sister has to figure in a court of law as a principal, or accomplice, in a murder case—and possibly myself with her—I could not consent to associate my poor Phyllis' name with mine. So I took the plunge."

"You are a beastly idiot," shouted Brett. "If I had the power I would give you six months' hard labour this moment. Who ever threatened to put your sister, or you, in the dock."

"You have done your best that way, you know."

"I?—I have shielded you throughout."

"I feel that. But your own admission shows that I am right. Shielded us from what? From arrest by the police, of course."

"But why take this precipitate action? What has Lady Delia's death to do with your marriage with Miss Browne?"

"That's it, Brett. I cannot explain. I just have to endure silently."

"Did you give her any reason for your absurd resolution?"

"Yes. I could have no secrets from her."

"Did you inflict all this wretched story on a woman you loved and hoped to marry."

"You may be as bitter as you like. That is my idea of square dealing at any rate. What other pretext could I invite for—for giving her up?"

Mensmore found it hard to get the words out. In his heart Brett pitied him, though he raged at this lamentable result of the only bright interlude in the whole story of death and intrigue.

"And what did Miss Browne say?"

"Oh, she just pooh-poohed the whole business and pretended to laugh at me, though she was crying all the time."

"A nice kettle of fish you have made of it," growled Brett. "You help your sister in her folly of silence and then proceed to give effect to it by ruining your own happiness and that of your affianced wife. Have you seen Miss Browne since?"

"No"

(To be continued.)

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THE EDITOR'S PAGE.

The new features introduced into *Short Stories* last week, viz., the tales entitled "A Keeper of Secrets" and "Tales Told Off Duty" (which, of course, you are reading) by no means exhaust our improvements. While we have, metaphorically speaking, taken off our coat in order to cope with the additional work which new features always entail, we have decided to put a new coat altogether on *Short Stories*. And very smart the new cover will look, as you will see for yourself next week. By the way, you might ask your friends to look out for it, too. And your enemies as well, for that matter, though after being introduced to *Short Stories* they could not, I feel sure, remain your enemies any longer. They would recognise at once that such a good turn deserved another, and a reconciliation would be the upshot. So you will observe that, in addition to being the best fiction paper in existence, *Short Stories* may become a royal road to good-fellowship.

❦❦❦

"Frank" of Kilburn lives away from his people, who reside in Northampton. He is on perfectly good terms with them, writes to them occasionally and sees them two or three times a year. But his "dear old dad" has a paternal bone to pick with him on the score that he doesn't write often enough. "I would write more frequently," says my correspondent, "but the fact is, I never know what to say. I stick pretty closely to my work and live a commonplace, humdrum life in which nothing happens that is worth chronicling. So I am always in a difficulty as to how to write other than a few bald sentences."

Don't worry, "Frank," but write oftener. Depend upon it, the "dear old dad" doesn't regard your letters as so many "bald sentences." It is not the details of your letters that he prizes. What he wants is to hear from you, even though yours be the briefest of epistles. For so long as he receives any communication from you he will know that he is in your thoughts. And that is a tenderly-prized reflection to the parental mind.

❦❦❦

"R. P." asks me the question as to why civil servants are uncivil.

"While," he writes, "all sorts and conditions of shopkeepers are the very incarnation of politeness, civil servants are the exact contrary. I allude more particularly to post-office clerks, who, to my mind, are the most careless, negligent and impolite body of people I have ever known. Why they are so I can't imagine. Certainly they have no sort of right to be. For when all is said they are the servants of the public, not, as they would have us suppose, the masters. Frequently, I have entered a post-office, and been kept waiting for several minutes for a penny stamp, solely because the lady behind the counter was not disposed to put down the novel she was reading, or was so engrossed in carrying on a flirtation with somebody else in the place. Nor are my charges of neglect and impoliteness confined to the female clerks. The men are equally culpable in this connection. Now, as a taxpayer, I must strongly protest against this abuse of the public funds."

❦❦❦

My correspondent is a little sweeping in his charges. I am bound to say that, although I have met post-office clerks who were not over attentive to business, I have also met those who went out of their way to be obliging. "R. P." should remember the old saying about "black sheep," and should not attack a class for the sake of a few offenders.

❦❦❦

Apropos of this subject, have you ever heard the story of Lord Rosebery and the post-office clerk? It was during his lordship's tenure of the Premiership that he one day went into a post-office to send a wire. Wishing to be quite explicit in the message, he was rather more diffuse than one is wont to be. Whereupon the clerk, who did not know Lord Rosebery, and who was of an officious character, impertinently remarked that the sender of the wire seemed to have a lot of money to waste.

❦❦❦

Lord Rosebery gave him one glance, then quickly ascertaining the name of the impudent official from another clerk, filled up a second form and addressed it to the Postmaster-General, and requested that the clerk should be removed from his position. The clerk, on seeing the signature "Rosebery" to this wire, turned white and red and white again, stammered out a dozen apologies, and behaved generally like a man who is quaking from head to foot. The upshot of it was that Lord Rosebery, after giving him one or two words of very cogent advice, promised to overlook the matter. Since that time that clerk has been one of the most polite of men.

"Terence" has a little suggestion to make which, if adopted, would do much to turn the industrial methods of the world upside down.

"I am extremely fond of outdoor sports and exercises," he writes, "but except on Saturday afternoons have very few opportunities of indulging in them. This is because I am employed in an office all day, and by the time my work is done it is too dark for *al fresco* occupations. Now what I want to suggest is this: Why should we not work at night instead of in the daytime? Start say at five p.m.; work till one a.m.; then sleep, and have the beautiful daylight in which to recreate. By such an arrangement employers would get the same number of hours from their workpeople, while the latter would have conferred upon them an inestimable boon. What glorious times one could have—a football match every afternoon."

Very likely "Terence," but you seem to forget that life is not all beer and football matches. Apart from our pleasures, there is always staring us in the face the hard grim fact that we must live, notwithstanding the satirist's remark that he didn't see the necessity. In order to live we must work, and the fittest time to work is after sleep. Just imagine, after a couple of hours at "Soccer," having to go and do eight hours work. You wouldn't like it, would you "Terence"? And there are other objections to your suggestion, if you carefully think the matter over.

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Printed by Horace Cox, Bream's Buildings, London, E.C., and published by C. Arthur Pearson Ltd., Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

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Height 12ins. Width 7ins.

Rye Clock

(WITH ALARUM) **18/-**

WE will supply any reader of *Short Stories* with one of these 18/- Alarum Clocks on monthly payments as follows:

YOU send us **2/6** with your name and address, and we will send you one on approval.

IF you approve of it, you send us **3/-** on receipt, and **2/6** each month for five months, making the full **18/-**.

BUT OUR NET-CASH-WITH-ORDER PRICE IS **16/- ONLY.**

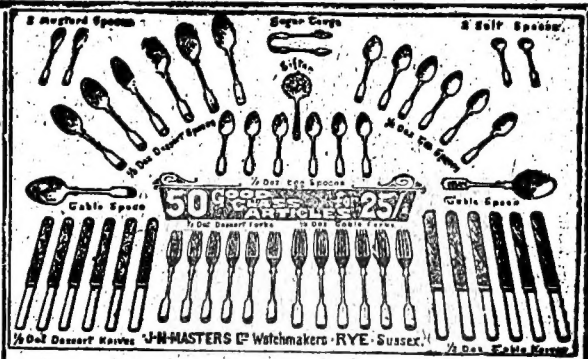
And we will refund the Cash sent, if you do not approve of the Clock, and you return it at once. (Signed) J. N. MASTERS.

A FREE TRIAL FOR 2/6

OUR

20th CENTURY CATALOGUE

containing illustrations of Watches, Clocks, Jewellery, &c.; &c., at 20 per cent. below London prices will be sent to any address on receipt of postcard.



OUR TERMS.

We will supply any reader of *Short Stories* with one of our Parcels of Cutlery on monthly payments as follows:—

YOU send us **2/6** and your name and address, and we will send you one on approval.

IF you do approve of it you send us **2/6** more on receiving parcel, and **5/-** each month for four months, making the full **25/-**.

BUT OUR NET-CASH-WITH-ORDER PRICE IS **22/6 ONLY.**

And we will refund the cash sent if you do not approve of the parcel and you return it at once. (Signed) J. N. MASTERS.

Each Parcel contains 50 High-Class Table Articles.

RETAIL CASH PRICES.

6	White Bone Table Knives	3/6
6	" Dessert "	3/-
6	"Warewite" Table Forks	5/3
6	" Dessert "	3/9
2	" Table Spoons	1/9
6	" Dessert "	3/9
6	" Tea Spoons	2/-
1 pair	" Sugar Tongs	1/-
1 only	" Sugar Sifter	1/6
6	" Egg Spoons	1/6
2	" Salt Spoons	1/-
2	" Mustard Spoons	1/-
50	"Good Enough for a Gentleman's Table."	

PLEASE NOTE! That we also supply other goods on similar terms.

SILVER, 2/-

Gold 20/-

Any name supplied.

J. N. MASTERS LIMITED, "VERACITY" WATCHMAKERS, &C., RYE, SUSSEX.

"WORTH A GUINEA A BOX."

BEECHAM'S PILLS

FOR ALL

BILIOUS & NERVOUS DISORDERS,

Sick Headache, Constipation, Wind and Pains in Stomach, Impaired Digestion, Disordered Liver, and Female Ailments.

SALE OVER SIX MILLION BOXES YEARLY.

In Boxes, 1s. 1½d. and 2s. 9d. each, with full directions.

Prepared only by the Proprietor,

THOMAS BEECHAM, St. Helens, Lancashire.

Sold by all Druggists and Patent Medicine Dealers everywhere.

THE DAILY EXPRESS.

HALFPENNY.

A FREE GIFT.

500 40-EGG INCUBATORS,

Ladies and Gentlemen can greatly increase their incomes by **POULTRY BREEDING**, thus converting 1d. Eggs into 1s. Chickens. To encourage this industry we intend supplying each applicant during the next 28 days with one of our **40-Egg Incubators.**

Write for **Gift Free Form** to POULTRY BREEDERS' APPLIANCE Co., 422 Kingsland Road, London, N.E.

SILVER QUEEN CYCLES.

ON MONTHLY PAYMENTS Enormous Stock. New and second-hand. From **10s. MONTHLY.** Carriage paid. ILLUSTRATED PRICE LISTS POST FREE any address. SILVER QUEEN CYCLE CO. LTD., 231 Tottenham Court Road, London, W.

A BOY'S NORFOLK SUIT

can be made by any lady who follows carefully the Paper Pattern and instructions

GIVEN AWAY

with every copy of

THIS WEEK'S

HOME NOTES.

The Best and Daintiest of Ladies' Weeklies. You should get a copy at once.

ONE PENNY.

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FIVE LETTERS ONLY.

Don't Forget this when You Buy.

Every Yard is Stamped L-O-U-I-S

PREVENT FRAUD

of CHEAP GERMAN air tubes fitted to genuine outer covers of

DUNLOP TYRES

Examine Air-tube Trade Mark=

Doubtful tyres tested at any of our depots. No charge.

Trade Mark.

The most expensive rubber made is employed in GENUINE Dunlop air-tubes.

The DUNLOP PNEUMATIC TYRE CO. Ltd.,
Factory: Alma Street, Coventry.

Branches: London, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Nottingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin, &c.

Estd.] [1790.

WE WILL EXCHANGE FREE

Any Garments worn by Ladies, Gentlemen, or Children of

THE "GRIFFIN" BRAND
OF PURE
WOOLLEN UNDERWEAR
should they become too small by Shrinkage in the wash.
Ask your Draper or Hosier for them, and see "Griffin" Brand Tab is sewn on each.

WRITE FOR NAME OF NEAREST AGENT.

F. & W. E. WHITE, Loughborough.

NATURE'S AID TO THE SKIN

Icilma

Icilma is the modern Fountain of Youth Injury

THE OXYGENISED NATURAL WATER

The only Natural and absolutely Safe Remedy for the Complexion, for Bruises, Chapped Skins, Chilblains, Roughness from East Winds and all Irritations of the Skin. "ICILMA" stops bleeding immediately, and with a magnifying glass the skin can be actually seen to grow over a cut or wound. **Never be without it: an "Icilma" Complexion.** If a Soft, Transparent Skin is desired, use always **ICILMA SOAP** MADE WITH **ICILMA WATER.**

(*N.B.*—"Icilma" has been examined at Somerset House, and as a Natural Mineral Water is exempt from the Patent Medicine Stamp.)

"ICILMA" ACTS AT ONCE AND LIKE MAGIC. Shilling Bottles (Scented 2s.)
Of all Chemists or from Barclay & Sons Ltd., 95 Farringdon Street, London, E.C.

ZEBRA Grate Polish

No Hard Work.

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